

Social Issues as a Focus of Community Studies

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Abstract

Community studies has a long history of employing participant observation strategies in the study of social issues. This chapter opens with an accounting of that history and then provides practical guidance on the use of participant observation as a data collection strategy. Relative advantages and challenges of participant observation are considered. Approaches for planning participant observation, for data collection in the field and for the analysis of participant observation data are detailed. The aim is not to suggest that every study of a social issue be a participant observation study, but rather to provide a road map of how the integration of participant observation might benefit the study of social issues.

31.1 Introduction

Social issues have long been a focus of community studies. Early in the 20th century, scholars linked to the Chicago School of Sociology tackled community concerns like race relations (Park and Thompson 1939), immigration (Wirth 1928), and urban decay (Park and Burgess 1925/1967). The ethnic enclaves and slums of rapidly urbanizing Chicago were the field sites for these studies. Participant observation that called for active engagement of the researcher in the community was a primary data collection strategy (Fine 2015). Deep engagement, a somewhat radical reaction to the disengaged “arm chair” approaches popular in the day, was deemed necessary to produce the kind of rich data needed to fully understand complex issues (Lutters and Ackerman 1996). Robert Park, a leader in the Chicago School, was quoted as encouraging young scholars to:

Go and sit in the lounges of the luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of the flophouses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and on the slum shakedown; sit in the Orchestra Hall and in the Star and Garter Burlesque. In short go and get the seat of your pants dirty in real research. (Unpublished quote by Robert Parks recorded by Howard Becker in McKinney 1966: 71).

Only then, through participating in and observing the social worlds surrounding an issue, could a full understanding emerge. Such an

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understanding was necessary if social science was to contribute to the relevant policy debates of the day (Lutters and Ackerman 1996).

That kind of grounded approach to the study of social issues carried forward through mid-century with the “Second” Chicago School and then beyond. Participant observation was fundamental to now classic community studies from that era including: Whyte’s *Street Corner Society* (1943), Vidich and Bensman’s *Small Town in Mass Society* (1958), and Gans’, *The Levittowners* (1963). By the 1970s, the idea that intense and engaged observation in a setting could yield potent empirical and theoretical insights on a social issue was widely accepted (DeWalt and DeWalt 2010). In the decades to follow the use of participant observation spread to such fields as education, policy studies and even marketing (Fine 2015).

In contemporary community studies, the focus of participant observation has broadened to account for larger social injustices like racial inequality and poverty alongside local culture and group dynamics (Fine 2015). Using participant observation as a primary field study method, recent community studies have linked discourses about poverty that circulate in wider society to moral values and practices in small town life (Sherman 2009), tied the racial injustices fueling the mass incarceration of Black men in the US to family and neighborhood life (Goffman 2014), and connected the fall out of extreme poverty and exploitation to capitalist entrepreneurial solutions to the provision of housing (Desmond 2016; Salamon and MacTavish 2017).

For close to a century then, the field of community studies has worked to afford a holistic, ecological perspective on social issues. As Silverman and Patterson (2014) point out, that kind of perspective to the study of social issues seems particularly compelling today given the following:

- Theories of **globalization** tell us that people and places are increasingly linked across geographic space. Understanding social issues demands accounting for the dynamics of these interdependencies in ways that take into

account how particularities of the local context shape and are shaped by the global context.

- The current emphasis on **devolution** promotes local solutions to complex social problems. Yet the development, implementation and evaluation of effective local solutions needs to be grounded in empirical, context-specific evidence. A context sensitive approach to the study of social issues can contribute to that body of evidence.
- **Accountability**, particularly for research funded with public dollars, increasingly necessitates that research contribute to the solution of real world problems beyond the academy. Research situated in a local place and produced in the context of relationships can provide a strong platform for the meaningful application of findings.
- Finally, **ethical concerns** about the moral responsibilities among researchers and communities press for more socially just and collaborative approaches to the production of knowledge (Lassiter 2005). Research conducted in collaboration with community partners that responds to local concerns and incorporates local knowledge can provide a response this call for more ethical and less extractive or exploitive approaches.

These and other contemporary forces make a more grounded perspective particularly appropriate to the study of social issues especially as they relate to local communities, institutions, and organizations (Silverman and Patterson 2014). Participant observation as a data collection strategy makes that kind of perspective possible.

This chapter is a practical guide to using participant observation as a data collection strategy to study a social issue. The chapter begins by offering a brief definition of participant observation and discussing relative advantages and challenges of this strategy. Specific techniques related to pre-data collection, data collection and post-data collection are then detailed. The aim is not to suggest that participant observation is the only way to study of a social issue, but rather to include it on a menu of methodological options.

31.2 Defining Participant Observation

Participant observation is one among many strategies nestled under the umbrella of qualitative field research. As a “style of data collection” (Fine 2015: 1), participant observation is a central tool within ethnography. As the name infers, it involves *participation* through active engagement of the researcher in the study context, and *observation* while in that role of participant (Angrosino 2008). While observation is primary, participation in a setting calls for a researcher to employ a range of additional techniques including informal and formal interviewing and collecting and analyzing archival and visual material (Bernard 2012). Participant observation can provide the context for more quantitative approaches like surveys and questionnaires by either setting the stage for the development of instruments or as follow up. While seldom used as a sole strategy, the information gathered through participating and observing is deemed as important to the scientific analysis of a social phenomenon as is the information gathered through other approaches (DeWalt and DeWalt 2010; Fine 2015).

Participant observation overlaps with, but is distinct from, other qualitative approaches (Fine 2015). As a data collection strategy, participant observation involves considerable conversation. Yet, unlike straight up interview studies, the observational aspect allows a researcher to compare what people say to what they actually do. The participation aspect also stands in contrast to other naturalistic observation strategies that downplay engagement. While participant observation might sometime include passive or fly-on-the-wall approaches, the stance in contemporary participant observation is most often oriented toward immersion as a participant in order to observe and learn through direct experience (Angrosino and dePerez 2000).

31.2.1 Advantages

The major advantage of participant observation lies in the rich, complex understanding that

emerges from close study over time. That closeness allows a researcher to learn what life is like inside a group or organization. Interrelationships and patterns within often taken-for-granted aspects of social life appear in sharp relief when an outsider, or someone with a fresh perspective, is closely engaged in group life or organizational operations. Further, a kind of tacit and embodied understanding emerges when a researcher “feels” what is like to participate in daily life that stands in contrast to more explicit and intellectualized understandings (DeWalt and DeWalt 2010).

Beyond those advantages, participant observation strategies can help a researcher to ask the right questions in the right way and to access hard to reach populations or topics. By understanding local social processes, a researcher can craft a research focus that is responsive to local concerns. Further, close contact allows researchers insights into how to ask questions in locally and/or culturally appropriate ways. Relationships formed in the field can open access to otherwise hard to reach study populations or topics. Appropriate steps to build trust can help overcome past negative experiences that cause a community to be reluctant to let researchers in. Understanding local social norms about gender, race/ethnicity, and age can help a researcher act strategically as they approach a population or sensitive topic (Schensul and LeCompte 2012).

31.2.2 Challenges

Time involved in doing participant observation is a major drawback (Fine 2015). Most ethnographic or field research approaches have a standard expectation that the researcher engages in the community for at least the better part of one year. Few student researchers, no matter how passionate they are about studying a social issue, have that kind of time. Strategies for careful planning before entering the field (described below) can help expedite the time needed to collect and analyze quality observational data.

Additional potential challenges come in documenting observations and in the subjective nature of observations. Participating while observing can

make it tough to record data. Initial notes, often take the form of jottings recorded on scrap of paper or a cell phone, or simply committed to memory must be fleshed out into the full field notes that constitute the main data source of participant observation. Personal discipline and diligence are required to make this happen in a timely fashion. Delays mean that data is lost as details are forgotten. Further, a good deal of subjectivity is potentially introduced in participant observation as every observation is filtered through the interpretive frame of the researcher. Personal experiences, value systems, and standpoints all shape what a researcher selects to observe and the interpretation of that observation (Schensul and LeCompte 2012). Reflexivity or the practice of constantly questioning how one's assumptions are shaping the research process helps maintain a check on subjectivity. Suggestions for managing the challenges are offered later in this chapter.

31.3 Doing Participant Observation

Like any other research approach, a prime objective in participant observation is to collect data that will answer a research question. However, it also is important that what is unique about participant observation is that the value of the data rests on its richness of detail and not just how it answers a research question. In working toward the objective of answering a research question, participant observation generally flows through three stages: a planning and preparation phase that happens before formal data collection begins, a data collection phase and a formal analysis phase that happens after data collection is essentially complete. While aspects of these phases are germane to a range of research approaches, the strategies described below are those more specific to participant observation.

31.3.1 Planning and Preparation Phase

Participant observation demands that researcher gain entry into often private spaces in order to

access intimate information about daily life. To do so a researcher must move from being a stranger to being accepted within the group. Traditionally within community studies, that transition happens as a researcher spends months or even years in a community. Specific strategies and techniques employed before data collection begins can help smooth that transition and work to position a researcher well for data collection.

Start where you already are. A participant observation study begins with selecting an issue and locating a study site. Blackstone (2012) recommends initiating this step by *starting where you already are*. Some of the most engaging community studies have emerged when researchers focused on an issue present in their immediate surroundings. A summer internship in a public housing project (MacLeod 1987/2009), a class assignment on urban poverty (Venkatesh 2008), and chance encounters in a neighborhood (Dunier 1999) all sparked interest in issues that then became the foundation for community studies. At other times, the issue, in essence chooses the site. An interest in issues related to fracking led to a study site in the Marcellus shale fields of Pennsylvania (Wilber 2012). Concerns about the fall out of environmental policy on timber dependent communities led to a year-long residence in "Golden Valley" California (Sherman 2009).

In considering study sites, access should be a paramount consideration. A range of factors can shape access. Language barriers, social norms about age and gender roles, along with practical matters like the need for a visa and the requirement for elaborate, formal permissions can significantly deter access and/or delay field study. The goodness-of-fit, then, between a researcher's personal characteristics and a study site is important to consider. Angrosino (2008), thus, recommends starting site selection with an inventory of skills, competencies, dispositions, and values and considering how these might mesh with various sites. A study site where, for example, social norms about gender roles limit women's rights might be a challenge for a researcher with a strong feminist orientation. After all, Angrosino asserts, the role during field

work is that of researcher, not social reformer. Picking a site with minimal obstacles helps ensure access.

Pragmatic factors like the current affairs within the community and the level of resources (e.g. time and interest) that an organization or community can commit to the research endeavor are also important to consider. If a community experiences a major event like a flood or a wild fire, it might not be the best time for field research focused on a less critical topic. In contrast, that community at that time might be an ideal place to study emergency response to natural disaster.

Once a feasible research site has been identified, spend some time becoming familiar with that place or becoming familiar with it in new ways. Drive around or ride the public transportation to get an overview of the lay of the land. Taking note of the location and condition of housing, commercial areas, and key institutions like churches, banks or schools. From there, walk around town to gain a more nuanced, closer range view. What kinds of businesses are present or absent? Who are the clientele in various establishments and who is perhaps missing? Consider how people interact with or avoid each other on the street and in the shops. Step into a store or strike up a conversation on a street corner. Small talk about the weather or an upcoming event posted on a flier can help ease a researcher into the flow of local life. If a specific community organization or institution is the focus, spend some time in that context as well. Schedule an initial informational tour in the office. While there, note the layout and use of space, the items and information on the walls, who is there and the kinds of interactions happening.

Maintain a heightened sense of awareness to the surroundings during these initial (and later) encounters. Actively engaging all of the senses noting sights, smells, sounds, taste and feel will add richness during these early observations and provide clues about social life important to effectively entering the community or organization as a field study site.

Forge key connections. The use of a key informant, that is someone well versed and well

connected in the local setting, is a common strategy in community studies. A key informant can help to translate the community to the research by providing insider perspectives and connections. A key informant can also help to translate the researcher to the community. William Foote Whyte, in his 1930s classic study of a Boston neighborhood, for example engaged “Doc” as a key informant. As an upper-class graduate student at Harvard, Whyte had struggled to gain entry in his working class study site. Doc acted as a gatekeeper connecting Whyte through their personal contacts and vouching for his trustworthiness. In more applied or collaborative work, partner organizations or agencies play this key role. Existing networks of agencies or organization often allow quicker and more diverse contacts in a site than might otherwise be possible.

Working through relationships, whether with a key informant or organization, can have drawbacks, however. A key informant can introduce bias as they steer a researcher toward personal contacts or a particular sector of a community that may or may not be representative. For good or bad, a key informant’s reputation likely rubs off on a researcher in ways that may limit access in the field. Angrosino (2008) cautions against getting *captured* by the first welcoming individual. Carefully select key informants who are well respected and liked, make use of multiple key informants, and diligently seek broader contacts to overcome these challenges.

Use of an advisory group over a single key informant or organization can help overcome these challenges as well. Before forming an advisory group be clear about the purpose and scope for that group. Will they provide advice on research strategies, help with recruitment and/or provide insights on emerging findings? Select group members well suited for those purposes. That may mean selecting advisory group members who represent particular perspectives or areas of expertise or who have connections to specific sectors of the community. The diversity of those perspectives is one advantage of using an advisory group over a single key informant.

Reducing the dangers of being seen as aligned with one faction over another is an added benefit. Effective use of an advisory group hinges on clear and frequent communication and the selection of individuals who are willing to *teach* the researcher.

Determine data needs. The flexible nature of participant observation is one of its advantages. A researcher can enter a site wide open to the possibilities of discovering new issues, new directions, and new research questions. Yet that openness can soon feel overwhelming. It is also a strategy sometimes referred to as “going on a fishing trip.” Going fishing does not always lead to landing a fish. Better, Johnson (2017) recommends, data collection be a bit more decisive from the outset about specifically what events and activities will be useful to observe in order to gather the information relevant to the study’s research questions. For some projects, a theoretical framework or a conceptual model rooted in the current scientific literature will guide the choice of observations. For example, in the first edition of this *Handbook*, Salamon (2008) provides a comprehensive accounting of what to look for in order to fully account for a community. The categories of physical, economic, social and natural capital reflect a community capitals theoretical framework often considered central in community studies. Documenting those aspects of community would then demand specific observations. Other efforts might take on a strategy of shadowing participants for a day or so observing them across the contexts that define their life.

Bernard (2012) suggests creating a data checklist. That checklist can serve as a guide for what observations need to be completed and a record of which team member completed each observation and when. A checklist can also provide a good deal of accountability during the data collection phase ensuring that various observations and activities are scheduled and completed. Data needs naturally change during the course of a study or project and the checklist can be periodically revised.

Build rapport and establish trust. Rapport, simply defined as a friendly relationship, can take

time to build. It involves establishing a sense of trust for the researcher within a community so that members feel confident in sharing sensitive information. DeWalt and DeWalt (2010) emphasize that rapport exists when informants share common goals with the researcher and agree to help the researcher access information. Rapport-building starts with showing respect and empathy, being truthful, and evidencing a clear commitment to the wellbeing of the community, organization, or group (Kawulich 2005). Active listening, a sincere interest in understanding, dress, demeanor and personal conduct should from the start convey recognition and respect for local norms and expectations. Honest disclosure of the researcher role is also important to building rapport. While there is a careful balance in participant observation between full disclosure and staying discrete enough not to interrupt daily life, there is seldom (if ever) a need to maintain a fully covert stance. Most university institutional review boards (IRBs) do not permit that in research involving human subjects. Give some thought ahead of time to how to best introduce researchers and the study.

Authentic assurances of confidentiality are also critical to establishing trust (Angrosino 2008). Participant observation asks individuals and groups to reveal often intimate aspects of their lives. The researcher then collects those intimacies as data. Ethical treatment of the that information is paramount. That ethical treatment begins with taking time to make clear within the research team the purpose of a study, the kind of information that will be collected, and how that information will be stored, managed and used. In studies involving participant observation in private spaces (e.g. homes), it is particularly important to be clear as a researcher about what will count as data. Consideration of these factors before data is collected helps ensure the ethics of later processes.

Asking elders and community leaders for formal permission to study in a community or group is another display of respect. This is of course required if a study involves entry into private spaces like a land-lease mobile home park, a country club or in institutions where entry

is restricted like a public school. Even if research activities are only planned in public spaces, it is prudent to ask some kind of formal permission to study. A press announcement in the local paper, mention of the study in the city hall newsletter and pulpit announcements on Sunday can help establish the legitimacy of the researchers and get the word out about the study or project. Efforts to gain formal permission or endorsement for the study are particularly important in communities where prior research efforts have been exploitive or unwelcome (Lassiter 2005). Spend some time learning about local processes for gaining permission before entering a site. In this case, it is probably better to follow the expected protocol than to have to ask for forgiveness and potentially lose field access.

Finally, Angrosino (2008) suggest that “making every effort to be helpful” can serve as a means for establishing rapport and trust. Gauge the debt-to-benefit ratio by asking whether the burden of a researcher’s presence outweighs the benefits of the potential findings or visa-versa. If the study falls on the burden side, strategize around how to better contribute. Building in hours to volunteer at the local food bank or share an expertise with an after-school program can evidence a commitment to the well being of the community or group. It is equally important to be explicit about the parameters of the study and field staff engagement. If time in the community is limited, do not overpromise. Community-based work often comes with a penchant for wanting to affect change, but stirring things up and then leaving after a year with no institutionalized supports to continue such efforts is unethical.

Observations and encounters during these initial stages should be recorded. Jottings on a map, notes in a field journal, or photos and sketches can capture details and provide a framework for developing full field note accounts. Memos can summarize early impressions providing a backdrop against which to contrast what is later learned (Emerson et al. 2011). Initial observations and encounters in place often help to tighten the focus of a research project.

31.3.2 Data Collection Phase

With the focus of a study or project defined, a basic familiarity achieved, key connections forged, a data plan in place and the foundations of trust and rapport established, a project is well positioned to move into the data collection phase. In this phase, participating, observing and documenting become paramount activities. Specific strategies around blending in as a participant, capturing detail in the field and producing a written record help ensure that this phase results in the kind of rich, thick data needed for rigorous participant observation study.

Blend in. Effectively, as a participant observer, you want to try and blend into the scene while observing. Just as a researcher is observing and taking notes, others in the study site are watching the researcher. The idea is “to behave appropriately enough to be accepted as a participant at some level” (DeWalt and DeWalt 2010: 49). Give some thought to how dress and demeanor will impact blending in across each study contexts. Professional dress, for example might be appropriate for observing at a school board meeting, when helping out with a neighborhood clean-up, grungier attire is expected. Johnson (2017) recommends as well that early on in a project it’s a good idea to keep political views and opinions more private. Later, after relationships have developed and the researcher’s place in the group is more solidified, revealing personal aspects is less likely to shut down conversations.

Johnson (2017) also recommends giving thought to the level of researcher engagement anticipated during each observation. A researcher’s role can vary from passive to more active depending on the context. While a classroom observation might demand a more passive approach defined by sitting in the back of the room, other settings might demand more active engagement. While younger children might be enthusiastic about a researcher’s overt presence in their school, teens are often more hesitant to be identified as the subject of a study. Clarifying the level of expected engagement and the researcher’s role can help avoid confusion in the field. It

also helps professionals and participants understand how or whether to introduce researchers. Skipping this step can lead to awkward situations.

Blending into a community or organization can also be smoothed by taking part in the activities of daily life in the study site: shop for groceries, wash a load of clothes in the local laundromat, walk in the park, attend a Sunday church service, stop in at the local café, read the local paper, listen to radio, visit the library. The intent here is to do as the locals do; to become a participant engaging in casual conversations and watching for clues about social norms, rules of interaction and language use that will aid efforts to merge into the crowd.

Mistakes or a faux pas in efforts to blend in are almost inevitable. A wealth of field research stories chronicle blunders that inevitably caused a researcher to stand out more than fit into a situation (c.f. DeWalt and DeWalt 2010). These moments should be taken in stride as they can provide a rich opportunity for deeper learning about behavior and meaning.

Observe. While a researcher might take on a more passive role in terms of participation, observing is never passive. Actively observing means attending to details, looking for interactions, counting things, listening carefully, noting non-verbal cues, and diligently trying to see things through new eyes (DeWalt and DeWalt 2010). This kind of observing is in contrast to how most of us move through our day-to-day lives. Learning to observe this way is a skill and as a skill it can be learned and developed. Janesick (2015) offers useful exercises for developing observational skills. These exercises begin with observing and documenting a still life. The task is to capture and record as much detail as possible in 5 min of observing. From there, she encourages taking on increasingly complex settings—a familiar physical space, a familiar person, a busy location, a stranger and finally a full scene. Always, she recommends beginning with the wide view, moving into the details, and then moving back out. Practicing these skills in daily life can also help.

There are tricks to seeing while experiencing and remembering details. Chunking out an observation, taking keen note of what happens upon entering the setting, midway through the observation, and just before leaving the field setting can help draw attention to details. Working out from a specific incident in the field can likewise help embed details to memory by creating a mental stream of the observation. Likewise, constructing a mental running recording of the conversation can aid with capturing and remembering actual dialogue. Counting things—people, events, chairs in the room—rather than just noting *few* or *several* can help cement details to memory. Diligently trying to see the space, the people, the interactions through a fresh perspective keeps observations of more mundane activities rich in detail. For a new field researcher, initial observations, particularly of complex events, can feel overwhelming. With practice and time, active observing become habit.

In addition to attending to detail, it is important to balance observations. Unusual events or characters easily capture researcher attention and in that way introduce bias (DeWalt and DeWalt 2010). Day-to-day activities encountered by just participating in the context are as important to capture as the more formal or seemingly monumental events. Plan for observations that attend to the core experiences of daily life within the group.

Actively observing is exhausting. As a field researcher, it is important to know the limits of how much one can endure at a time so as not to lose data. As a standard rule, 3 h are needed to write up field notes for every hour of observation. Given 24 h in a day, and the need to sleep, 4 h of field research in a day seems the maximum. Some researcher alternate between days in the field and days writing up observations. Other strategies include staying in a hotel near the study site but away from the disruptions of home. Whatever the approach, planning around limitations is critical to making a study feasible.

Finally, Angrosino (2008) lists a number of personal qualities necessary to be effective at participant observation. Included are: a keen

awareness of the mundane, a good memory, a cultivated naïveté, and excellent writing skills. DeWalt and DeWalt (2010) add *patience* to that list reflecting anthropologist Margaret Mead's insistence that a good field researcher needs a tolerance for poor conditions, a capacity to resist impulses like interrupting, and an ability to avoid attachment to particular factions or groups. Considering personal capacities in terms of these qualities and strategizing to address the areas of challenge can make for a more productive and positive field study experience.

Document. Data resulting from participant observation strategies are largely textual. That makes it necessary to record a written account of field experiences and observations. Like with visual observations, that written account needs to attend to details about the physical setting, the appearance, behaviors and interactions of people, and the frequency and duration of events and activities.

Initially, written accounts take the form of *jottings* written discreetly during or immediately following an observation. These contemporaneously recorded notes provide an essential foundation for the more comprehensive field note account that are written later (Emerson et al. 2011). It is necessary, then, that jottings capture sufficient detail to function as a resource. Concrete sensory details about facial expressions, gestures, sights or sounds can function as mnemonic devices triggering memories later (Emerson et al. 2011). Use of shorthand, abbreviations and acronyms can speed note taking. Sketches and diagrams recording the physical arrangement of objects or people are often more efficient in the field than a narrative description. Key phrases written down from a dialogue can later help trigger the memory to a full exchange. Of course modern technology and the ubiquitous presence of cell phones with cameras and digital recording capacity have introduced new means for capturing details. Pictures of a scene or details dictated into a phone can certainly function alongside jottings as initial efforts to document observations. Video and audio recordings that involve people, while tempting, usually require more complex permissions.

Some field situations afford ample opportunity to record notes while other situations require a researcher to be quite nimble. Taking notes while observing in a city council meeting is fairly easy compared to recording the activity of a family meal. Field researchers devise all sorts of strategies for recording notes in the field. Most carry some kind of note book at all times. Cell phones with note taking features can also serve that purpose. Taking a "bathroom break" is a commonly used means for grabbing a few minutes to jot notes. Regardless of the means, findings a few moments to step away and write/record some details is usually necessary. Creativity and some forethoughts generally provides such moments.

Other researchers adopt a note taking role where overtly jotting notes in the field becomes just something they do (Emerson et al. 2011). Explaining a commitment to accurately recording events and interactions can validate this practice. Students, in particular, are given tolerance and accommodation for note taking in real time. Emerson et al. (2011), however, emphasize that writing while observing introduces some level of distraction for both the researcher and the group members making for another tradeoff of field research that has to be negotiated.

Regardless of how they are captured, these early recordings have to be extended into full field notes. Emerson and colleagues (2011: 86) provide a definitive guide to the art of writing field notes that "create a detailed, accurate and comprehensible account of what has been experienced." Toward that end, they offer the following guidelines:

- **Record field notes immediately after leaving the field.** The timing of writing up field notes is crucial. Memories fade quickly with time and lost detail means lost data. As a general rule, field notes should be recorded within 24 h of an observation. Preschedule blocks of time for writing field notes to coincide with field observations. There is typically a certain amount of ambivalence toward writing notes that scheduled time can help overcome.

- **Avoid “talking out” field notes.** Participating and observing fills a researcher with a set of experiences that it is nature to want to share, if only for the emotional release. Talking out an experience provides that release and reduces the urge to details things in writing. Save that release for the written page.
- **Go into “writing mode”.** The intention is to get a spontaneous and detailed account down on paper. Leave the editing for later. Recall in order to write, not to analyze or reflect. Some researcher write by working chronologically, others start with the high point of an observation and work out from there.
- **Establish a standard format for notes.** Add headers that record the time, date, location, and duration of the observation and the name of the field researcher. Standard sections can describe arriving in the field, sequential events, and then exiting. Page numbers and systematic file names prove critical to organization as the amount of written data accrues.
- **Write for an audience.** If a real audience for the field notes is absent, imagine one. Writing with the notion that someone else will read the notes encourages the inclusion of more detail.
- **Stick to what was observed and experienced.** In participant observation, experiences are always filtered through the frame of the researcher. In that way no observation or set of field notes is considered objective. Still, there is need to try and limit the instinct to move toward interpretation too soon. Johnson (2017) suggests including a descriptive and a reflective section in field notes. The descriptive portion is as accurate an account as possible. The reflective portion allows space for researcher comments.

Additional guidance on how to write field notes can be found in Dewalt and DeWalt (2010).

In addition to documenting observations, it is critical in participant observation approaches to document the evolution of conceptual and

practical aspects of field study. Emerson et al. (2011) and Johnson (2017) both recommend regularly producing reflective memos that chronical experiences in the field including research reactions to events and explore early conceptual thinking. Later, in the analysis phase, these early memos provide critical means for working back through the progression of field study to understand how methods and assumptions might have evolved over time.

Additional data. The strategies described above hold promise for helping develop a grounded or situated understanding of a social issue. Yet they leave a researcher open to the fallacy presented in the parable of the blind men and the elephant. In that story, each blind man, upon his encounter with a specific aspect of the elephant, asserts an understanding of the beast likening it to a wall, a snake, a fan and so on. The moral of the story, of course, is that each man’s understanding, rooted in their limited, localized encounter, is mistaken in understanding an elephant in full. Understanding a social issue in full often requires taking a broader view.

Community ethnographers have a long tradition of not stopping at the “tracks” or the edge of town, but rather working to locate a situated understanding of a social issue within wider extra-local and historical contexts (Buroway 1998). Strategies that move the research “off the block” and lend attention to external factors like governmental regimes or structural racism and classism help to connect micro-level processes to relevant macro-level social and economic contexts (Dunier 1999). Making use of archival materials and extending the place of the research by following phenomenon are strategies used to make those connections.

Use of archival materials. Tapping into the often rich, historical context of a social issue can extend a study beyond the immediate. Traditional strategies used in ethnography include systematically reviewing back issues of the newspaper, examining archived minutes from public meetings, and employing Census data to track demographic and economic shifts within a place over time. Each of these can enrich the understanding of a social issue by adding historical

context. Knowing, for example, that a study site had doubled in population, grown poorer or richer or more diverse over recent decades are essential pieces of information to understanding context. Historic records archived at city hall can be similarly useful. Similarly, historic photographs can provide another source of data beyond interviews and observations and even the memories of local residents. As these and others records have become digitized, access has become easier. One catch when using historical data is the need to contextualize it. Dollars, for example incomes and housing costs, need to be standardized to a constant year. Easy to use inflation conversion tools are accessible online.

Extending the case with theory. For sociologist Buroway (1998), a central task of understanding any issue involves locating the everyday within extra-local and historical contexts. Through what he terms an “extended case method”, he lends particular attention to how the local is simultaneously shaped by and shapes macro-level external forces. Academic theory serves as his starting point. In an iterative process that moves back and forth between theory and field study, he extends the micro-world of his case study from describing a localized situation to identifying social process and then to delineating the wider forces that impress themselves on everyday life. By vertically integrating indigenous narratives with academic theory he considers the local as simultaneously shaped by and shaping those macro-level external forces. He begins with a theory but seeks to refute that theory by drawing on his case studies asking what does this case tell me about theory? The intention is to causally connect cases rather than to reduce each case to an instance of general law. Each case works in its connection to others making it possible to extract the general from the unique and build theory.

Extending the place. Ethnographer Dunier (1999) employs a strategy he terms an “extended place method.” About his field research for Sidewalk (1999: 344), a study of street vendors Greenwich Village, he explains, “For me to understand the sidewalk, that place could only be a starting point.” Dunier encourages field

researchers to *follow the data* and to *study up for completeness*. In the case of Sidewalk, following the data meant pursuing confirmation of many of the background stories his participants shared. Studying up for completeness entailed interviews at city hall to gain a perspective on the reasoning behind the policies and practices he observed to shape life on the sidewalk.

Marcus (1995) encourages a multi-sited approach to ethnography arguing that such an approach is needed to understand the kind of interdependencies strengthened by processes of globalization. Collins’ work in *Threads* (2003) provides a strong example of this approach to extend ethnography’s view. To trace the transnational economics of the apparel industry, she studies in four study sites tracing relationships from the US to Mexico and from corporate headquarters to the factory floor.

31.4 Formal Analysis Phase

While analysis is ongoing in participant observation studies, there comes a point, late in the data collection process, after a sufficiently large amount of data have been generated, when more formal and systematic analysis needs to be undertaken. A range of approaches exist to guide this process. Included are “radically *inductive*” approaches through which conceptual and thematic categories are grounded in and emerge from the data as well as *deductive* approaches wherein theoretical and conceptual categories selected a priori are used to guide the analysis (Johnson 2017: 122). While inductive and deductive approaches might seem disparate, researchers often use a combination of the two, particularly if the project has multiple goals (e.g. both applied and theoretical). Regardless of the orientation, analysis of the primarily textual data that derives from participant observation proceeds through a series of distinct practices (Emerson et al. 2011). The practices begin with a close reading and proceed through stages of coding, interpretation, conceptual development and finally dissemination of findings.

Close reading and initial coding. The first of these involves a close reading of the entire

corpus of field data. Each piece of data is read and reread in order to become familiar with the whole. This “analytically motivated reading” is intended to open up the opportunity to “reinterpret the import and significance of events” experienced and recorded sometimes months earlier (Emerson et al. 2011: 145). In collaborative research, this re-immersion in the data is a shared experience in which all team members simultaneously read through the full set of data.

That close reading is followed by initial coding efforts. A code is a single word or short phrase used to symbolically label or categorize a segment of data. Codes may derive in situ from a close reading of the data (inductive approach) or a researcher might draw on a particular theoretical or conceptual framework to generate a list of codes that are then applied to the data (deductive approach). More inductive approaches are often termed **open coding** in contrast to the **closed coding** used in deductive approaches (Johnson 2017). Open coding provides the opportunity to ground initial analysis in the perspectives and experiences of community members. Codes are often in vivo or derived from participants’ own words. In that way, open coding avoids the bias of looking for and finding what was assumed to be in the data. Still, drafting a set of initial codes that mesh with a study’s research questions and conceptual framework provides a useful starting point, particularly in more descriptive or applied efforts.

When using an open coding approach, Emerson et al. (2011: 177) suggest beginning by asking questions of the data: “What are people doing? What are they trying to accomplish? How do members talk about, characterize and understand what is going on? What assumptions are they making?” The answers to these questions can then help reveal codes. Emerson et al. (2011) also encourage that priority be given to *process* rather than *cause* during early phases of analysis. Attending to process and sticking to what is present in the data prevents moving toward premature interpretation.

Discovering patterns. The next step of analysis involves moving from what Shensul and LeCompte (2012) term *item level* analysis where

the focus has been on breaking the data down into small parts, toward what they term *pattern level* analysis in order to identify categories of items or codes. The move is from the specific to the more general as connections are made between codes, analytic categories, theoretical dimensions and/or issues. This step often demands some effort to clean up codes. This can entail renaming, reducing, merging codes into umbrella categories. This step is also an ideal time to seek out falsification or the “deviant voice” that might counter emerging theoretical or conceptual notions (Saldana 2014).

Novice researchers sometimes report a sense of getting lost during early states of the coding process. As a remedy, Emerson et al. (2011) encourage the use of written memos throughout analysis. Initial memos, in particular, provide an opportunity to name and explore specific analytic issues and patterns that cross cut incidents in the data (check Emerson for cite). These early analytic commentaries can assist with reflexivity and aid in the exploration of emerging ideas. Combined, initial coding and memoing provide a chance for the researcher to, “step back from data identify, develop, modify broader analytic themes and arguments” (Emerson et al. 2011: 157). Reflective memos focused on how a researcher’s disciplinary background, personal experiences, and interests might be shaping early interpretations of the data can help keep assumptions in check (Johnson 2017). These memos allow a researcher to ponder why they might be seeing the data the way that they are and to consider alternative explanations.

Identifying themes. Next, is a step that Saldana terms “theming the data” (Saldana 2014) by adding “is” or “means” to a major code or central concept in order to develop themes. Johnson (2017: 125) provides the example of “definition of community” as a code. By itself this code is not a theme but by adding “is” as in “definition of community *is* informed by sense of involvement in community” it becomes a theme. As part of a second cycle of coding, a researcher now returns to the data to recode the data using these larger patterns or themes. This step supports moving analysis toward what Shensul and

LeCompte (2012) term a *structural level* wherein the central task is finding broader relationships. When these broader relationships have to do with identifying and describing if, when, and why something happens, a practice termed **axial coding** can be useful (Johnson 2017). Applying the analogy of a wheel, the researcher uses initial codes as the axis, and then works to identify the spokes by following out the conditions, causes and consequences related to that code.

During this step, a research is likely to identify more themes than are manageable for one study of one report (Emerson et al. 2011). It thus becomes critical to select themes that are most salient to the purposes of the study. In applied work, in particular, this likely means giving priority to what seems significant to participants. It can also mean prioritizing the themes of focus into those that need to be pursued now (perhaps because of the impending need for action) and those that can wait (perhaps those having more to do with conceptual understandings). Themes can sometimes be winnowed down by considering how they link to each other. In this way, some themes invariably fall out as subthemes.

Memoing can again prove useful. While initial memoing was primarily exploratory, later memoing typically includes firmer asserts made through summative and data supported statements (Saldana 2014). These more Integrative memos work to tie various codes and bits of data together and help push analytical choices as decisions are made about how to link together incidents or themes and how to connect these to constructs (Emerson et al. 2011). Taking a step back to consider how themes and incidents relate to larger constructs and working to “explicate contextual and background information” are critical to constructing a wider understanding of key ideas (Emerson et al. 2011: 162).

Collaborative analysis. At this stage, it is worth noting that all too often, even when community members are included as partners in the data collection process, they are excluded during analysis and interpretation. Practices like “member checking” might ask participants to respond to study findings but these typically occur after analysis. Increasingly, within

community-based work there is a call for more inclusive and reciprocal approaches to analysis as well as data collection. Lassiter (2005), in particular, presses researchers to employ practices of co-interpretation by engaging principal consultants (a term used in place of informants or participants) as co-intellectuals during analysis. Acknowledging the challenges that necessarily arise, Lassiter and others (Johnson 2017; Saldana 2014) argue for the powerful, humanizing benefits that occur through finding ways to “reconcile differing visions, agendas, and expectations” during analysis (Lassiter 2005: 137). In collaborative analysis, efforts go beyond seeking approval of findings. Community partners are engaged in the collective coding of data. This collaborative team comes together often to check-in and compare coding schemes and engage in authentic, genuine conversations about what is emerging from the data in an effort to reach, not consensus, but what Saldana (2014) terms “interpretive convergence”.

Analyzing additional data. Visual data collected during participant observation can often be analyzed with strategies similar to those described above. Computer-based coding software (e.g. Nvivo, Atlas-ti, MaxQDA) now commonly offers options for handling and coding visual data. For other forms of data, such as newspapers or websites, content analysis approaches wherein *counts* of predetermines constructs may prove useful. Descriptive analysis of census and other demographic data and trends over time can provide important background context within which to situate other field study findings. Triangulation of the use of multiple forms of data works to enhance the strength and credibility of findings.

31.5 Disseminating Findings

Whether class assignment, a funded research study, or a project-based service learning project, as a study nears completion, researchers must find some way to share findings. It is at this stage that a researcher can wonder “which way from here?” (Stoeker 2013). In no small way, the

purpose of the study will shape the kinds of written products and methods used for disseminating findings by guiding ideas around what will be presented, to whom, and in what format. If the research has been done as a class assignment, guidelines and structure around the written report and/or presentation of findings are likely in place. Outside of that, Johnson (2017) describes a range of possibilities reminding us that projects should include multiple means of broadcasting findings.

Community or organizational forums can provide a powerful means for reporting findings back to the community. Often held as a culminating event, these presentations should aim to make findings “accessible to a broad audience and connected to conditions and features within the community” (Johnson 2017: 140). A good deal of advanced planning is needed around the selection of venues, event timing and format, and appropriate publicity to get the word out. Details like childcare, food, and transportation are also critical to consider in order to expand engagement. Johnson (2017) emphasizes as well how a community forum should move beyond seeking the rubberstamp approval of findings by remaining open to negative feedback and encouraging dialogue for deeper understanding and movement toward next steps.

Traditional academic papers and presentations provide another means for sharing findings. Here the emphasis shifts to adding to the body of knowledge and inciting further research (Emerson et al. 2011). The presentation of findings likewise shifts as the audience is now individuals and groups further removed from direct experience of community. Selecting an appropriate journal or professional conference is key to ensuring uptake of the knowledge produced in any study.

Policy reports can provide another avenue for dissemination of findings. Again, thoughtful planning upfront about how best to engage in local or national policy debates is needed. This often begins with judiciously selecting from among the findings those most appropriate for policy change. Johnson (2017) encourages researchers to frame the problem, include a

compelling ‘hook’, and consider target audience when preparing a policy report. Collaboration with a policy-oriented organization can help.

Websites and blogs allow researchers to share information in a wider variety of formats (e.g. photos and video clips). These newer modes of dissemination can also provide additional and important spaces for interaction through enabling the comments feature.

Johnson (2017) also describes how the translation of research to action might flow as community-based organizations use findings to develop programs, initiatives and campaigns for change. Findings can augment an organization’s report to funders helping to bolster the case for additional funding. Findings can also help refine services or press for new services within a community. On a wider level, study efforts might provide a foundation strengthening or expanding university-community partnerships or encouraging grassroots movements through campaigns aimed at raising awareness of an issue and collectively advocating for change. Media and social media campaigns, posters, post cards, public service announcements and further engage the community and press for the uptake of study findings.

31.6 Conclusion

In closing, the aim here was to provide practical guidance around the use of participant observation as a data collection strategy. That strategy of close engagement, so central to community studies, seems useful in the study of social issues today. Globalization, devolution, increasing accountability and ethical concerns about research all press for a focus on social issues that takes context into account. Adequate planning, as laid out in this chapter can work to position a study to attend to context and work to expedite field time. Judicious efforts once in the field to blend in, observe and document day-to-day interactions can produce the kind of rich data needed for through participant observation. Finally, rigorous analysis phase, whether done alone or collaboratively, can lead to the

discovery of powerful and novel insights into understanding complex social issues. Sharing those insights through a range of avenues can contribute to knowledge in the field and also move toward meaningful action. It would seem then that Park's prompting "to go and get the seat of your pants dirty in real research" might be as applicable today as it was nearly a century ago.

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