

Turning an Internship into a Research Opportunity

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Introduction

This handbook is designed to encourage and support students who are considering using a job as an opportunity to conduct an original research project. The guide covers everything from developing a research topic to writing up your final report. No previous experience with field research is assumed. You should not feel obligated to read the entire text from beginning to end; rather, feel free to use it as a reference for those aspects of your project about which you have specific questions or concerns. Although this guide describes a research project from the beginning through to a written report, you may not be interested or able to complete all the steps in the process. Regard this information as a set of opportunities and suggested paths for productive and provocative engagement; it is neither a contract nor a set of rigid requirements.

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Why do social science research?

The value of research. Doing social science research, and doing it well, requires a vast commitment of thought, time, and effort. What makes it worth this investment?

- Doing original research provides an exciting, "hands-on" opportunity to acquire an unparalleled depth of understanding of a problem. Attending lectures and reading about organizations and practices is certainly important and always a necessary component of research. But, immersing yourself in a community and researching it yourself provides an additional learning experience that you simply cannot replicate in the library or in the classroom.
- You create the possibility of explaining something previously unexplained or of developing an entirely new perspective on an issue, thereby making a genuine contribution to society.
- The skills you will pick up in the process—how to identify a problem, critically evaluate sources, summarize and analyze data, and communicate results and conclusions, to name just a few—are valued in virtually all fields and careers.
- You can receive course credit at Wellesley for your work (as a 350 Independent Study).

Why should my research be systematic? Having decided that you do want to do research during your internship, why should you bother to be systematic about it? It would probably be easier to simply observe and absorb the environment during your internship, and then write up a paper recounting your impressions of and thoughts about the experience. Such a process may indeed produce an interesting account, and the importance of intuition and opinion in social research should not be completely disregarded. Nevertheless, as Hoover & Donovan state,

Because society is interesting for the drama it contains, there is a tendency to dispense with systematic understanding and get on with the descriptions, stories, and personal judgments. Although these can be illuminating, they often have limited usefulness because highly subjective accounts of life form a poor basis for the development of common understanding and common action (1995: 6).

If your research is to be more than merely interesting, if you wish to make a contribution to your own repertoire of skills and to others who might be able to use your work, it must be done systematically. Your conclusions will need to be "valid in light of the appropriate evidence and compelling in the way that it fits the question raised" (6). In order to fulfill these objectives, good researchers base their work on reliable evidence, attempt to identify and minimize probable errors as far as possible, and provide detailed descriptions of the methods and data they use. These methods help readers to evaluate the conclusions drawn and other researchers to replicate their results (Katzer et al. 1998: 16-17).

Suggested reading:

- Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb and Joseph M. Williams, *The Craft of Research*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, pp. 1-11.
- Hoover, Kenneth, and Todd Donovan, *The Elements of Social Scientific Thinking*, 6th Ed., New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995, pp. 3-16.
- Katzer, Jeffrey, Kenneth H. Cook, and Wayne W. Crouch, *Evaluating Information: A Guide for Users of Social Science Research*, Boston: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 1998, pp. 12-19.

Getting an internship and getting funding

Help is available from the Wellesley College Center for Work and Service (CWS). Keep in mind that locating job opportunities, applying, and securing an internship takes time, so it pays to begin your search as early as possible. The deadlines for many summer internship applications, for example, fall in early March. Stop by the CWS on the top floor of Green Hall, or begin your search on the web.

- For leads on finding an internship as well as links to other helpful sites, see <http://www.wellesley.edu/CWS>.
- Also through the CWS, students may apply for one of approximately 150 stipends offered to enable students to accept unpaid internship opportunities. See <http://www.wellesley.edu/CWS>. Note that these stipends give priority to those demonstrating financial need.
- Finally, through the Dean of the College students may apply for summer research grants in all subjects. Visit <http://www.wellesley.edu/DeanCollege/studgrant/studgrnt.html> for complete information.

Developing a topic

Booth et al. (1995:36) suggest the following four steps to developing a viable research topic:

1. Find an interest in a broad subject area.
2. Narrow the interest to a plausible topic.
3. Question that topic from several points of view.
4. Define a rationale for your project.

This guide provides a short synopsis of these steps, but you will certainly benefit from looking at the rich description of the process Booth and his colleagues provide.

Finding an interest. If you have already secured an internship, you probably already know what broad subject area you want to focus on in your research. If not, you might draw from past courses that interested you, discussions with professors or classmates, or books or articles you have read and want to know more about. If you are still stuck, Booth et al. suggest going to the library and locating an index of articles in your field, or about the type of organization—its work and history—in which you are interning. Scan the subject headings for ideas. A trip to the library will also help you evaluate whether your chosen interest has enough resources to support a research project.

Focusing your topic. As Booth et al. write, “A topic is probably too broad if you can state it in fewer than four or five words” (37). This is critical advice. Don’t just name a subject or problem, but identify processes and comparisons. Limit your topic by adding modifying phrases; for example, “Teacher-student interactions” could be restricted to, “The teacher-student relationship in grades 1-4.” You can make your topic more interesting by using words such as “affect,” “link,” “develop,” or “contribute” to describe an action or hint at the relationship between two variables. For example, the previous topic could be further clarified as, “The contribution of teacher expectations to pupil performance in grades 1-4.”

Asking questions. Importantly, in your research you should not merely provide information, but ultimately you should *ask a question* and then answer it. For example, the topic above could be rephrased as the question, “Do teacher expectations shape pupil performance in grades 1-4?” This formulation of the topic is qualitatively different from the previous ones because it sets the stage for you to make a claim, rather than simply regurgitate information. As soon as you have narrowed your topic, you can begin to ask questions. As Booth et al. state, “Questions are crucial, because the starting point of good research is always what *you do not know or understand but feel you must*” (39, italics in original). They suggest spending some time brainstorming a list of questions—not worrying about the answers, but simply writing down all the who/what/where/how/why questions you can think of. Later you can review the list to determine which questions are most intriguing and most central to your topic.

Creating a rationale for your investigation. Importantly, good research not only asks a question for scholars or the public, it proposes to *solve a problem*. Research problems may not always be social problems or issues of particular public interest. A problem can be something unresolved within existing bodies of knowledge that may be of interest to scholars rather than the general public. You can develop your question into a research *problem* if you can explain why your question is significant—not just to you, but to your readers and to a broader community. You must formulate a persuasive response to the challenge, “So what? Why should anyone care about the answer to your question? What are the costs of *not* knowing the answer to your question?”

Thus, Booth et al. propose the following model for developing a topic into a research problem:

1. *Name your topic: I am writing about _____.*
2. *State your indirect question (and thereby define the condition of your problem):
...because I am trying to show you who/how/why _____.*
3. *State how your answer will help your reader understand something more important yet
(and thereby define the cost of not knowing the answer: ...in order to explain to you
how/why _____ (63, italics in original).*

For example: 1) I am writing about the teacher/student relationship in grades 1-4, because 2) I am trying to show you how teacher expectations shape pupil performance, in order to 3) explain to you why it is dangerous to label students according to ability level at a young age.

Formulating a problem from your original question is not always an easy or straightforward process. Sometimes the primary goal of a research project is solely to identify or clarify a problem. Thus, you need not have your problem perfectly defined at the outset; in fact, a bit of uncertainty may help you remain open to unanticipated problems that you discover in the course of your research. Nevertheless, by thinking about your problem early on and keeping the question, “So what?” always in the back of your mind, you will be able to maintain a stronger sense of direction and purpose throughout your research experience.

Suggested reading:

- Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb and Joseph M. Williams, *The Craft of Research*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, Ch. 3-4, pp. 35-63.

What exactly is “participant observation”?

If you are performing research while also taking part in an internship, your research method is that of participant observation. Some of the critical issues of participant observation (e.g. creating an identity and gaining access, discussed in the next section) are solved in a perfunctory way by your role as an intern. Nonetheless, you will be able to perform the role of intern more effectively—for the organization and for yourself—if you become self-reflective about the processes of participant observation.

Norman K. Denzin defines participant observation as a research “strategy that simultaneously combines document analysis, interviewing of respondents and informants, direct participation and observation, and introspection” (1989: 158). When engaged in participant observation, the researcher collects information in and about a specific social location—an organization, office group, neighborhood, school, club, etc. Some scholars use the term “ethnography” to describe the product or results of what Denzin and others label participant observation. In other words, the scholar’s access and data collection is termed participant observation, while the outcome is often called an ethnography. John Van Maanen defines ethnography as a “written representation of a culture (or selected aspects of a culture)” (1988:1). We will say more about ethnographic writing below. Denzin outlines three essential characteristics of this method of investigation:

Sharing as fully as possible in subjects’ activities. In the case of some investigations, this entails actually moving to live amongst a particular group for a lengthy period of study; however, this is not always possible or even necessary. In a study of gender dynamics in biology labs, for example, participant observation may require spending days in the lab, following subjects to meetings, eating lunch with them, and attending any informal social gatherings outside work. In general, as a participant observer, you should attempt to immerse yourself in the community and culture as fully as is both practicable and appropriate. The more complete your immersion, the more comprehensive and convincing will be your results. If you are interested in drawing only modest conclusions, which might be all that is possible in the course of a relatively short (e.g. three-month) internship, a more limited involvement may be perfectly suitable.

Sharing as fully as possible in subjects’ symbolic world. As Denzin states, this “often entails learning their language, their rules of etiquette, their eating habits, and their work patterns” (161). Learning and recording these rules and patterns is both an end goal of your research and a strategy to win yourself greater acceptance and access within the community. Familiarize yourself with the community’s particular customs, power hierarchies, and non-verbal behaviors. For example, if you are interning for the Governor of Massachusetts, take account of who gets to choose when to take a lunch break and who must plan their breaks around others. Do the secretaries communicate with each other differently than their bosses communicate with each other? What symbolic significance might the physical layout of the work environment have? Note the ways in which the patterns of interaction in the subjects’ community differ from other communities, and ways in which subgroups within the community differ from other subgroups. Finally, be constantly aware of your own habits and behaviors and what impressions they make on those under study. “Sharing the symbolic world of your subjects” means that you will collect much more information than may be relevant for your research project. But this awareness will help prevent misunderstandings that could jeopardize your credibility. This awareness will also provide background information that will certainly be important in identifying relevant information and sustaining your relationships (see discussion of research ethics below).

Creating an identity. As Denzin rightly notes, “cultures do not provide within their social structures a role called participant observer” (162), thus you must create a role for yourself and simultaneously establish the legitimacy of that role. What responsibilities will you have as a participant? What privileges, if any, will you have as an observer? What balance will you strike between trying to fit in and trying to preserve your own personality? Most importantly, Denzin states, “observers should not try to present themselves as something they are not and should use to advantage all the personal characteristics they possess to enhance their observational activity” (162). You will probably need to discuss your role early on with your superior(s) at work as well as with your academic advisor(s) to ensure that you achieve an appropriate and workable blend of participation and observation.

Suggested reading:

- Denzin, Norman K., "Participant Observation: Varieties and Strategies of the Field Method," in *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods, 3rd Ed.*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1970, pp. 156-181.

Gaining and sustaining access

As a participant observer you may enter your community in one of two ways: either as a known investigator, or as a covert investigator. As Lofland and Lofland point out, the problem of “gaining access” to the group or environment is often much easier if you do not announce your intentions as a researcher. You could simply come in to work every day and begin recording your observations on the sly. This course of action has at least two major advantages. First of all, you might be granted access to situations from which known researchers would be barred. Moreover, it eliminates the problem of people altering their behavior because of the presence of a known investigator.

Nevertheless, there are serious ethical objections, and possible legal obstacles as well, to this sort of covert field research because of the deception it requires. These objections apply particularly to research in “closed” settings, such as a workplace, but are also relevant even to covert research in public places, such as a train station. Whether such deception can ever be justified is a matter of heated debate; in any case, deception is a *prima facie* wrong and if you plan to use it, you must have a compelling reason why it is necessary. Before undertaking a covert research project, discuss your idea first with a professor or advisor, and read up about the issues and problems of covert research. Some readings Lofland and Lofland suggest are listed at the end of this section.

Though gaining access can be somewhat more difficult as an announced researcher, it is by no means impossible. As a known investigator, your role could be one of a participant researcher, in which you are a full member of the community you are studying; or, you could be an outside researcher, in which your role as an investigator dominates. Participant researchers have the advantage that their knowledge of and position within the target population can help them win the respect and trust of those they are studying, while outside researchers must often work harder to overcome the wariness of those whom they seek to observe. If you are undertaking research as part of an internship, you will most likely be a participant researcher. In either case, known investigators “have the task of making their intentions known, gaining cooperation from the setting participants, and, depending on the character of the setting, perhaps seeking formal permission” (Lofland and Lofland 1984: 24). If you are having problems securing cooperation for your research, Lofland and Lofland make the following suggestions (1984: 25-27):

- Do not hesitate to utilize any connections you might have, whether they are family friends, professors, or sympathetic colleagues working for the same organization.
- Provide others with a short description of your research plan and why you believe it is important to gain access to this particular environment.
- If you are conducting interviews, write or call interviewees in advance to introduce yourself and set up a time and place convenient for them.
- Demonstrate “enough knowledge about the setting or persons you wish to study *to appear competent to do so*” (26, italics in original).

Gaining access to the target environment, however, is only half of the battle. Those who have done field research know that gaining access is not a one-time problem to be solved, but rather an ongoing effort that must continue throughout the duration of the research. Even within a community you may not be granted admission to every situation you seek to study. Problems such as intra-community quarrels or personality conflicts may also hamper your access. Lofland and Lofland offer several tips for sustaining and cultivating acceptance once you have been granted access to the general environment (36-44):

- Continue to use the same strategies that worked to get you in initially: connections, explanations, common courtesy, and adequate knowledge.
- Establish a few key informants—that is, sympathetic subjects who, as complete members of the community, may have broader access than you to information and situations, and who can provide you with a true insider’s perspective and understanding of the community.
- As for community quarrels and conflicts, maintaining neutrality is the professional researcher’s safest course of action if she wishes to maintain access to all members of the community. Of course, this is often easier said than done, and frequently researchers must choose between two roles: one as a scientist, striving for objectivity; another as a social agent, with opinions and emotions.

Researchers must always be aware that they have an ambiguous role with respect to the subjects of inquiry. The subjects open themselves to scrutiny and the researcher is entirely dependent upon them. Thus the researcher is obliged not only to do no harm but perhaps to return something in exchange. The best a researcher can give, ultimately, is the benefit of the insight and knowledge gained, and with that new knowledge, perhaps new insight, self-reflection, and perhaps new opportunities and freedom for the subjects based upon a more general and reflexive understanding.

Finally, once you have gained access and settled into a fieldwork routine, you may find that your daily research is not always particularly exciting. Devising strategies for "keeping awake" to your daily surroundings is no less important than maintaining access within the community, because the most unrestricted access in the world is worthless if you gradually lose your appreciation for the privilege. Erin Collins '99, who undertook a field research project examining concepts of capital and symbolic boundaries among a stock car racing team in Maine, described one of her strategies for avoiding boredom during her daily routine:

One trick I found really helpful in trying to maintain perceptiveness in a routine situation was to remind myself before each time I walked into the garage...to treat time differently, to enchant it with a sense of “oneness”...by telling myself that this group of people was only going to be together in this way under these circumstances once in the whole wide world and time, and I was the luckiest person on earth because I had the opportunity to watch this once in a lifetime experience. (All quotations of Erin Collins taken from personal interviews conducted in July and August of 1999.)

If you can approach your fieldwork every day with energy and a fresh pair of observing eyes, you will find that your observations will be clearer and more insightful. More importantly, you will be less likely to take for granted the remarkable generosity of those who allow you to observe and participate in their daily lives.

Suggested reading:

- Lofland, John and Lyn Lofland, *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis, 2nd Ed.*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1984, pp. 20-45.
- Additional readings on the ethics of covert research (from Lofland and Lofland):
- “Ethical Problems in Field Studies,” in William J. Filstead (ed.), *Qualitative Methodology: Firsthand Involvement with the Social World* (1970).

- “Sociological Snoopers and Journalistic Moralizers: Retrospective on Ethical Issues,” in Laud Humphreys, *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places* (1975).
- “Disguised Participant Observation,” in Edward Diener and Rick Crandall, *Ethics in Social and Behavioral Research* (1978).
- “Deceptive Social Science Research,” in Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (1978).
- “Unknowing Participants and Analysis of the Research Dilemma,” in Paul Davidson Reynolds, *Ethical Dilemmas and Social Science Research* (1979).

Emotional stress

Obstacles to your research may arise not only from external sources, but also from within yourself. Field research, because it requires a high level of continuously alert attention and personal involvement with a community can also be very stressful. The unknown investigator constantly faces the burden of deception and the risk of detection, while known participant observers must constantly juggle their multiple identities. Moreover, there is no guarantee you will like the people you are studying; conversely, you may like them so much you are tempted to abandon your research and become a full, "ordinary" participant. This is sometimes called, "going native." As Lofland and Lofland remark, "There can be a continual and often subtle sense of separation between the observer and the observed that is painful and poignant. It is as if, daily, one were being told: 'You are here and you know a lot about us, but you are not really one of us'" (1984: 35). Finally, you may discover that the people whom you are studying are suffering from dire needs, and you may feel torn between continuing your research or abandoning it to devote all of your time and energy to helping the community. In the face of all of these challenges, it is important to maintain ongoing conversations with professors, other researchers, and/or friends with whom you can compare notes and put your experiences in context. Lofland and Lofland also recommend keeping a diary to relieve the stresses of field research.

Erin Collins echoes this advice. Relationships, she said, were very complicated and constantly changing. "You can't anticipate the emotional cost it's going to have on your life," she said. "You just have to roll with the punches." Field research has a life of its own, and you must be prepared to be flexible. Erin remarked that keeping a journal and having supportive friends with whom to talk helped keep her sane during the course of her research. Moreover, Erin strongly recommends keeping in close contact with an academic advisor who can help keep you focused on the scientific objectives of the project if you begin to feel overwhelmed by the personal aspects of field research.

Human Subjects Approval

For several decades, social scientists have been working under an ethical regime that requires that they gain institutional approval for any research involving human subjects. Every research or academic institution has established an "institutional review board" (IRB) that reviews research designs to insure that it is unlikely to inflict emotional or material harm. Although research that develops from and through an internship experience may be less formal than much experimental or ethnographic research because you begin as a member or invited visitor to the organization, it is not inappropriate to seek the approval of the IRB for any formal interviewing that you may conduct.

There are three core elements to protecting human subjects in research projects. First, ensure that individuals can make informed choices about their participation in the research, and protect any individuals who may have diminished autonomy and capacity. Second, ensure that the potential risks of a study are minimized and can be justified by the potential benefits. Third, ensure that the selection of research participants is appropriate, and not based simply on their easy availability, their willingness to participate, or other considerations not directly related to the problem being studied.

To ensure these protections, social scientists use a process of informed consent. This is not merely a form to sign but a process of communication between researchers and participants that conveys respect for the individual and responsibility for the researcher. The following is excerpted from the Wellesley College IRB Review Guidelines:

For adults able to exercise full autonomy in making choices about participating in a research study, the informed consent process should include the following:

- a statement that the study involves research, an explanation of the purposes of the research, and a description of what participation in the study will involve
- a description of any reasonably foreseeable risks and benefits to the participant
- if the study involves health treatments, the participant must be informed of alternative procedures or courses of treatment
- a statement describing the extent to which confidentiality of records or data identifying the subject will, or will not, be maintained
- for research involving more than minimal risk, an explanation of the treatment or resources available if any harm occurs
- identification of whom to contact for further information about the study (e.g., the Principal Investigator), and about participants' rights in the event of research-related harm (usually the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects [IRB])
- a statement that participation is voluntary, that refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which the participant is otherwise entitled, and that the participant may discontinue participation at any time

Informed consent should usually be obtained in writing. However, verbal consent is sometimes acceptable, e.g., under conditions of minimal risk, or where written consent would jeopardize the benefits of the study (8/12/97, pp. 5-6).

Samples of informed consent forms are available in the Sociology and Psychology Departments.

Collecting Data in the Field

Data logging. Your data will likely include mainly field notes and interview write-ups, though you can also use maps, census data, and other documents from the organization. Data logging can be very tedious and it requires a great deal of discipline. Erin Collins confirms that she sometimes had trouble forcing herself to be scientific during her observations. "It's so easy to get lost in the stories, because you are living their lives," she says. Nevertheless, the quality of your final product is directly dependent on the quality of the data you collect. It is crucial that your records be as thorough as possible, even if certain information or interactions seem unimportant at the time. If you pick and choose which data to log and which to exclude, you may fail to recognize unanticipated relationships or patterns of interaction. Moreover, you increase the risk of researcher bias. Thus, while it may be physically impossible to record everything, you should attempt to amass as much data in as much detail as possible. As Lofland and Lofland remark,

An enormous amount of information about the settings under observation or the interview in process can be apprehended in apparently trivial happenings or utterances, and these are indispensable grist for the logging mill. Understandably, then, the complaint of the novice investigator (or the boast of the professional) that he or she "didn't make any notes because nothing important happened" is viewed in this tradition as either naïve or arrogant, or both (1984: 46).

Field notes and records of interviews usually form the backbone of field research; however, if you can creatively use other media to supplement your data, such as news clippings, photography, or film, you can make your study more multifaceted and interesting. In a single research paper you are unlikely to use a wide array of data sources. The boundaries, dimensions, and quantity of information will be, in large part, determined by your research question. General common forms of data collected through field research are briefly discussed below.

Field Notes. In making your observations you will be using a combination of "looking, listening and asking" (Lofland and Lofland 1984: 47). Which activity is foremost will depend on the particular situation as well as on what kind of role you have created for yourself in the community. For example, if you are sitting in on a board meeting, you will probably be restricted to looking and listening; after the meeting adjourns, however, you may want to casually question one or more of the participants. What kind of things are you looking for? Denzin suggests focusing on any or all of following five processes:

1. Time – its social organization and passage
 2. Social situations – their encounters and uses
 3. Natural or contrived social occasions of interaction
 4. Social relationships, including gender, hierarchy
 5. The attitudes, meanings, languages, and symbols held by a group or sample of persons
- (1989: 77-78).

Moreover, Denzin suggests that your fieldnotes include: a short biographical history for each individual you study, the date and time of each period of observation, a description of the setting of observation, a description of subjects' dress and general appearance, notes of individual subjects' unique speech patterns or mannerisms, records of any non-verbal communications, explanations of the relationships between subjects, and descriptions of customs and rules of conduct (79-80).

Ideally, you will be able to take notes during your observation. If this is not possible, you should jot at least reminder notes during the observation, and then discipline yourself to write up complete notes *as soon as possible* after each observation. Do not rely on memory, which tends to be selective, incomplete, and often simply inaccurate. The gaps and inaccuracy could seriously compromise your final results. As Erin Collins remarks, "Where I was lazy [about writing up fieldnotes], it came back to haunt me later. And it will come back to haunt you." As a general rule, you should write up your notes no later than the morning following a day of observation (Lofland and Lofland 1984: 64). You may find a tape recorder helpful, so that you can record your fieldnotes quickly and conveniently, for transcription when you have more time and energy later. In any case, disciplined note-taking may be tedious, but it is absolutely essential for quality field research. It is not unusual to spend almost as much or more time writing notes as observing. Of course, this is not always possible. Nevertheless, it should be understood that professional ethnographers devote extensive time writing up their observations.

Robert Emerson describes fieldnotes as

accounts describing experiences and observations the researcher has made while participating in an intense and involved manner. But writing descriptive accounts of experiences and observations is not as straightforward and transparent a process as it might initially appear. For writing description is not merely a matter of accurately capturing as closely as possible observed reality, of "putting into words" overheard talk and witnessed activities. To view the writing of descriptions simply as a matter of producing texts that *correspond* accurately to what has been observed is to assume that there is but one "best" description of any particular event. But in fact there is no one "natural" or "correct" way to write about what one observes. Rather, because descriptions involve issues of perception and interpretation, different descriptions of "the same" situation and events are possible (1995:4).

In writing fieldnotes, you will be guided by your research question, and by what seems significant in light of that and perhaps other interests and themes that you are thinking about. Although you will try to capture as much as you can, you will inevitably focus on some aspects and miss others.

Fieldnotes are "inscriptions," Emerson (p. 11) says, of social life and discourse. As such, he suggest four implications concerning fieldnotes:

- "[W]hat is observed and ultimately treated as 'data' or 'findings' is inseparable from the observational process,"
- "the field researcher should give special attention to the indigenous meanings and concerns of the people studied,"
- "contemporaneously written fieldnotes are an essential grounding and resource for writing broader, more coherent accounts of others' lives and concerns," and
- "such fieldnotes should detail the social and interactional processes that make up people's everyday lives and activities."

Intensive interviews. While you can collect a great deal of data from observations and casual questioning, intensive interviews provide an excellent opportunity to enrich this data with a more focused conversation. For some projects, interviews may be the exclusive or principal source of data. Lofland and Lofland provide an excellent overview of how to conduct an open-ended interview (1984):

- Before each interview begins, introduce yourself and explain the nature of your study.
- Put the respondent at ease by telling him or her a little bit about yourself, emphasizing the confidentiality of the interview, and inviting him or her to ask for clarification on any of the questions if necessary.
- Remind the respondent that he or she is under no obligation to respond to every question. Because you, as the researcher, are in primary control of the situation, it is important that respondents know that they also have the right to set boundaries as to what they are and are not comfortable discussing.
- If you are taping the interview (as is strongly recommended), formally request permission before you begin and use a consent form. You should explain in your consent form if and how anonymity will be protected.
- Speak slowly.
- The structure of the actual interview can be flexible, allowing for a wide range of discussion. Lofland and Lofland suggest thinking of the interview as a “guided conversation.” Rather than having “a tightly structured set of questions to be asked verbatim as written, accompanied by an associated range of preworded likely answers,” you should use your questions as a guide or “a checklist of sorts, a kind of inventory of things you want to talk about during the interview” (59).
- Make sure to avoid leading questions, and use sensitivity when discussing personal topics.
- Most importantly, devote your complete attention to the interviewee. For this reason it is strongly advised that you tape the interview; otherwise, the act of taking detailed and accurate notes can be distracting and disruptive to the flow of the interview.

Besides notes or preferably tapes of the interview proper, you should also make a “facesheet” for each interviewee. The facesheet includes such basic factual information as the respondent’s name, date of birth, gender, occupation, etc., as well as the date and location of the interview. Finally, after the interview is completed you should take some time to write up a comment sheet, which should include but is not limited to a description of your feelings during the interview, any problems or confusion that arose, and any insights you have about how the data might be interpreted.

Interviews, especially conversational or dramaturgical interviews (interactive and semi-structured) are most useful for accessing respondent’s interpretations and lived experiences. Although interviews may be used to collect objective or factual information, you will find that simple questionnaires often collect this information more efficiently and consistently. Thus, you may find it useful to ask you respondents to answer some questions in writing. For a more complete discussion of the data logging process, including fieldnotes, surveys, and interviews, see the suggested readings below.

Suggested reading:

- Berg, Bruce L., *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1989.
- Denzin, Norman K., *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods*, 3rd Ed., Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970, pp. 69-120, 210-233.
- Clifford, James, and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986.

- Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
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Threats to the validity of your research

The data fieldworkers come to hold are not like dollar bills found on the sidewalk and stealthily tucked away in our pockets for later use. Field data are constructed from talk and action. They are then interpretations of other interpretations and are mediated many times over—by the fieldworker’s own standards of relevance for what is of interest; by the historically situated queries put to informants; by the norms current in the fieldworker’s professional community for what is proper work; by the self-reflection demanded of both the fieldworker and the informant; by the intentional and unintentional ways a fieldworker or informant is misled; and by the fieldworker’s mere presence on the scene as an observer and participant (Van Maanen 1988: 95).

Field research is subject to the same threats to validity as any other form of social science research, perhaps more so. If you are undertaking a field research project you should familiarize yourself with the many factors that can compromise any social science investigation. This guide will briefly address some of the threats as they apply particularly to field research.

External validity. External validity is defined as the extent to which your conclusions are generalizable beyond the particular community or organization in your study. If your conclusions cannot be applied to any other situations or groups, the value of your research will be limited. Thus, the problem of external validity is important to consider both before beginning research and throughout the research process. You must convince others that the community you studied is broadly representative of the communities to which you seek to generalize. Threats to external validity include, among many other things, the unique characteristics of individual subjects, as well as the unique characteristics of the surroundings in which a group lives and/or works. For example, if you study a group of Wellesley College students in order to make a claim about 18-22 year olds in general, you will face objections from your readers that not all 18-22 year olds are female, not all 18-22 year olds go to college, they don’t all live on the east coast of the United States, and so on. This is not to say, however, that a study of Wellesley College students could never be useful because it would never be externally valid. It simply means that you need to set clear boundaries on the conclusions you draw and the population to which it applies. The broader your generalization, the weaker will be the claims you can legitimately make. You often must strike a delicate balance between making a claim that is both generalizable (externally valid) and also well supported by your data (internally valid).

Internal validity. Threats to internal validity cast doubt on whether your data “represent real differences, or are...artifacts of the observational process” (Denzin 1989: 171). Two threats to internal validity merit particular consideration because of the high degree of personal involvement required in field research: researcher bias and reactive effects of the observer.

Researcher bias. It is impossible to enter a situation without some preconceived notions of what it will be like, and these ideas can insidiously affect how you collect and interpret your data. If you are unaware of your own biases, you risk seeing only what you want or expect to see. As researcher Peter Rose writes, "I once facetiously defined an ethnographer as ‘a social scientist who faithfully records his biased views of somebody else’" (1978: 15). There is no such thing as a completely unbiased researcher; however, you can take steps to minimize the impact of bias in your study. Lofland and Lofland suggest asking yourself these questions during the course of your investigation:

From what I know on other grounds about my own or the reporter’s commitments, values, and announced biases, are there reasons to be suspicious of the content of this

report? Does it fit all too conveniently with what I want to believe, or what the reporter might want to believe, about people and events? That is, is it *self-serving* and therefore to be regarded with caution? (1984: 51).

Reactive effects of the observer. A second threat to internal validity of particular concern to the field researcher is termed by Denzin as “reactive effects of the observer” (1989: 174-175). In other words, your mere presence in a community alters the very surroundings you are trying to study. Peter Rose repeats a joke heard in anthropology circles that the Navajo nuclear family is composed of “mother, father, children and anthropologist” (1978: 15). Erin Collins remarked that in her study of a racing team in Maine, her presence was threatening to one of the men’s girlfriends. As a result, the girlfriend, who rarely came to the track before, started hanging out at the track every night that Erin was there to keep an eye on her. As with researcher bias, it is impossible to completely eliminate the independent effect you have on your surroundings. You can minimize this interference, however, by heightening your awareness of how your presence changes others’ behavior. You should describe in your field notes any reactive effects you notice, and Denzin also suggests directly discussing the problem during interviews (175).

Other common threats to internal validity include subject mortality, subject bias, historical factors, changes in your perception over time, and changes in the way subjects report to you over time. If you are unclear about what any of these threats are or how they apply to your field research experience, see Denzin, pp. 172-175.

Suggested reading:

- Denzin, Norman K., *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods*, 3rd Ed., Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970, pp. 170-175.
- Lofland, John and Lyn H. Lofland, *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*, 2nd Ed., Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1984, pp. 50-51.

Leaving the field

Leaving the community you have observed and worked with may be unproblematic; however, depending on how intimate your research environment is, it can also be complicated and stressful. In either case, you can avoid misunderstandings by being clear about when and how you are going to leave. Are you going to continue working but simply end your role as researcher? Are you going to gradually cut back on your hours? Or are you going to leave completely after a certain date? It is also important to talk with members of the community about parameters for keeping in touch after you leave the field. Erin Collins talks about the difficulties she had when it came time to leave the auto racing team whom she had observed and worked with for several months:

Even though the relationship is instigated by a person's research interest, obviously human relations don't necessarily end when the research ends, and it's important/good ethics to make a graceful and respectful exit. I remember that I wasn't clear about this, and left the garage early one night, around nine, because I had a lot to do, (and I was probably tactless enough to explain it like that) and the team's sense of time was totally different, they were gearing up towards the end of the season and working until 3 in the morning on the racecar, so me leaving early seemed very strange to them. I figured this out when, as I was leaving, the driver yelled over at me, "Hey, I'm writing in MY thesis that you are SLACKING!!!!" and they all had a good laugh at my expense.

Over the course of your research the people in the community may come to know you more as a colleague or friend than as a researcher, just as you may come to think of them more as friends than as subjects. This is normal and appropriate; however, it can make saying goodbye awkward at best and emotionally wrenching at worst. Make sure to give plenty of advance warning as the date of your departure approaches, and be honest with the community about what will happen to your relationships when you leave. Finally, the end of your internship is an especially crucial time for you to be in close contact with a professor or advisor who can help address any questions or problems that might develop.

Organizing and analyzing data

A truly complete discussion of how to organize and analyze data is beyond the scope of this paper, which should be used primarily to discover what you need to read more about. It is strongly recommended that you look at Chapters 6-9 (pp. 69-137) in Lofland and Lofland on focusing data and developing analysis in qualitative research. Ewick and Silbey (1998, Appendix A and pp. 23-28) provide a detailed model for analyzing interview and observation data using keywords and concepts. Moreover, if you incorporate any quantitative methods into your research, Chapter 5 in Hoover and Donovan, "Measuring Variables and Relationships," (pp. 91-134) provides a good general review of quantitative data analysis.

Lofland and Lofland point out, first of all, that analysis should take place throughout the course of your research—it is not an entirely separate stage. "Researchers sometimes imagine data collection to be one phase of their work and analysis another," they write (1984: 131). A more productive method, they argue, is one in which "analysis and data collection run concurrently for most of the time expended on the project, and the final stage of analysis (after data collection has ceased) becomes a period for bringing final order to previously developed ideas" (131). Thus, you need to think about how you will organize and analyze your data as soon as you begin gathering it.

The main strategy Lofland and Lofland recommend is sorting your data into files as you collect it. They list three main categories:

- background files, such as "facesheets" from interviews,
- methodological files, such as how you address threats to validity, and
- analytical files, such as thoughts about the significance of particular interactions. Your analytical files, which contain the core of your research, can be further subdivided. Examples of analytic categories suggested by Lofland and Lofland include "roles," "encounters," "relationships," and "lifestyles" (1984: 71-92). These files should also address the substantive work of the organization you are studying.

Do not limit yourself to these classifications, however. In addition to general categories of roles and relationships, Ewick and Silbey organize data by topics specific to the setting, for example legitimacy claims in public organizations, issues concerning hierarchy and use of rules in formal organizations. If you have other ideas, even if you aren't sure you will use them later, make a file anyway. Also, you should make copies of your notes so that you can file observations under several categories. This is important because any concrete social event can be analyzed from several perspectives or through the lenses of different concepts.

As your analytic files begin to accumulate, social scientist Lee Cuba (1997: 101-104) suggests looking for three types of patterns:

- Patterns of responses. What explanations do subjects give for why they did a certain thing or act a certain way?
- Patterns of social organization. For example, examine patterns of how community members delegate responsibility and make decisions.
- Stages in a process. For instance, identify the emotional phases a subject experiences after the death of a loved one.

Throughout the course of this organization and interpretation of your data, try to remain receptive to as many fresh ideas and perspectives as possible:

- Maintain ongoing conversations about your research with friends and advisors. Bouncing your ideas off someone else will help you clarify your reasoning, and listening to others' thoughts and suggestions can help inspire entirely new lines of thinking.
- Constantly pose new questions and rework old questions about your data. You may find that a slight change in the way you ask a question results in a significant change in your perception of the answer.
- Most importantly, Lofland and Lofland advise that you refrain from drawing any rigid conclusions about your data "as long as it is possible, in a practical way, to do so" (1984: 136). Otherwise, you may unconsciously begin to interpret your data to conform with judgments you have already made.

Suggested reading:

- Lofland, John and Lyn H. Lofland, *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*, 2nd Ed., Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1984, Chs. 6-9, pp. 69-137.
- Hoover, Kenneth, and Todd Donovan, *The Elements of Social Scientific Thinking*, 6th Ed., New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995, Ch. 5, pp. 91-134.
- Cuba, Lee, *A Short Guide to Writing About Social Science*, 3rd Ed., New York: Addison Wesley Educational Publishers Inc., 1997, pp. 101-104.
- Ewick, Patricia and Susan S. Silbey, *The Common Place of Law: Stories from Everyday Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pages 23-28, Appendix A: Research Strategies and Methods, pages 250-261.

Writing it up

Once you have finished gathering and interpreting your data, you may think that the most important part of your work is complete; however, the presentation of your results is easily as important as the results themselves. If your report is poorly written, people are unlikely to recognize the significance of your results, whatever they may be. Thus, you should plan to spend a good deal of time on this final stage of your project. Lee Cuba's *A Short Guide to Writing About Social Science* serves as a clearly written and comprehensive source on writing up your research paper. This guide very briefly summarizes Chapter 4 in Cuba, "Papers Based on Original Research," (1997: 70-109).

Title. For better or for worse, your title will shape your readers' first impression of your work. For this reason, the title should primarily be informative, yet you should try to make it interesting as well. Writers often do this by combining a short, catchy title with a longer, more descriptive subtitle. Examples Cuba gives in his book include: *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* and *To Dwell Among Friends: Personal Networks in Town and City* (cited in Cuba 1997: 74-75).

Abstract. Whether or not you include an abstract in your paper will depend upon the purpose of your research, your audience, and the length of your paper. You should discuss with your advisor whether an abstract is appropriate in your case. If so, it should only be 150-200 words in length. In a few sentences, it should present your major hypotheses, provide basic information on your sample and methods, and summarize your results and conclusions. Writing an abstract is an excellent exercise in sharpening your argument and focus, and it forces you to identify your most important results.

Introduction. Your introduction serves several important functions. First of all, it should present the primary question or questions you sought to answer, and it should explain what approach (e.g., ethnographic approach? content analysis?) you took to find the answer. Secondly, it should review the most significant literature dealing with your topic, and place your research in the context of that literature. Finally, your introduction should clearly state your research hypotheses, and hint at your conclusions.

Research Methods. First of all, you need to describe your sample, the community or organization you studied. Discuss why and how you picked this setting and sample, and discuss which larger population you believe it represents. Secondly, describe your measurement tools. How did you record your fieldnotes? What did you record in your fieldnotes? How were interviews structured? Thirdly, state your main variables and explain how they were conceptualized (defined), and how you measured or recognized them in qualitative data. Finally, provide contextual information such as where and when you conducted your study, as well as any particular problems you encountered in collecting your data.

Results. This section, in which you present your findings, is the heart of your research paper. It is also the section in which you have the most flexibility in the particular style you adopt. There are several different ways of presenting your results; you will have to decide which method is best suited to your data and your personal style.

In his book, *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*, John Van Maanen presents a convincing criticism of two popular styles of presenting qualitative research:

The realist approach. In this method, the author "typically narrates the realist tale in a dispassionate, third-person voice...realist tales push most firmly for the authenticity of the cultural representations conveyed by the text" (1988: 45). The writer relates what she observes or learns without making

apparent the processes of observation or data collection. They do not distinguish their own voices from those of their subjects. Van Maanen finds several faults with this approach, including that realist authors tend to neglect the subjects' perspective in favor of their own, and that they implicitly claim "interpretive omnipotence...closing off or nailing down an interpretation without allowing alternative views to creep into view" (53).

The confessional tale. In this style of writing, "[t]he details that matter...are those that constitute the field experience of the author. This human bundle of exposed nerve-endings stands alone in the culture supposedly perceiving and registering the various happenings around him" (73). Though the confessional style is seemingly the opposite of the realist style, Van Maanen maintains that this essentially self-absorbed approach produces ultimately the same result: the researcher presents his or her own perspective to the exclusion of other perspectives.

The impressionist tale. Van Maanen advocates a style that is neither overly personal nor overly detached. He calls his preferred narrative style "impressionistic," as he describes below:

Impressionist tales present the doing of fieldwork rather than simply the doer or the done. They reconstruct in dramatic form those periods the author regards as especially notable and hence reportable. Tales often initiate an analysis of the nature of cultural understanding and the fieldworker's role as a student.... The story itself, the impressionist's tale, is a representational means of cracking open the culture and the fieldworker's way of knowing it so that both can be jointly examined. Impressionist writing tries to keep both subject and object in constant view. The epistemological aim is then to braid the knower with the known (102).

Conventions of the impressionist style include dramatic storytelling, a novelistic unfolding of events, and development of individual voices for individual narratives (including that of the researcher), all with the purpose of keeping the audience "alert and interested" (106). Impressionist tales thus include the researcher's analysis as another "tale" in the text.

Discussion and Conclusions. This last section of your paper should, first of all, provide answers for the primary questions you asked in your introduction, and address how conclusive those answers are. Secondly, it should persuade the reader of the significance of your research. What problem did your research solve? Why should anyone care? Finally, you should discuss the questions your research did not answer and the problems that remain to be solved.

Notes, References, Appendixes. If your professor does not give you specific guidelines for the use and format of these three sections, see Cuba, p. 109.

Finally, in writing up your research, you should follow general guidelines for writing any type of paper. Have peers and professors read over your drafts and plan on making multiple revisions. Constantly keep your readers in mind and try to anticipate what they might find confusing or hard to believe. Familiarize yourself with Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, the canonical set of instructions for clear and concise writing. Lastly, be wary of accidentally plagiarizing others' work (for a thorough discussion of what is and is not plagiarism, with examples, see Booth et al., 1989: 166-170).

Suggested reading:

- Cuba, Lee, *A Short Guide to Writing About Social Science, 3rd Ed.*, New York: Addison Wesley Educational Publishers Inc., 1997, Ch. 4, pp. 70-109.
- Strunk, William Jr. and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style, 3rd Ed.*, Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1979.
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Conclusions

Field research requires a significant personal commitment, but it promises significant personal and academic rewards. Erin Collins sums up her experience by saying, “It is really good to get out of your world and into someone else’s. It’s good to be uncomfortable like that.”

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