CHAPTER 8. FIELD NOTES AND OTHER DATA

Virtually all research involves documents, and most of these can be analyzed qualitatively. Although the focus in this book has been on *primary documents*, this chapter examines how to use many of these principles to work with *secondary documents*, including interviews, field notes from observations, and records. Content analysis, then, is basic to most research, regardless of whether the original data were derived from other documents such as newspapers, TV news reports, personal observations, interviews, or social networking sites. The researcher develops a record of some kind; if this is retrievable and subject to analysis, it is a document of research—a kind of "account" of some interaction or activity relevant to one's study. In the case of qualitative research, these documents are often written text or narrative—for example, accounts of what took place, descriptions, summaries of observations, or interviews. The only question (actually there are two) that remains then is how these documents (notes) are to be organized and analyzed and when and how one should go about this. The brief comments to follow are intended to provide some answers to these queries. Although there are different approaches to these questions (Berg, 1989, pp. 105–127), the following guidelines are based on our own work and numerous students' projects. They should be regarded as some "minimalist" considerations in planning and conducting a project involving field notes, but in most cases the researcher will want to supplement these with more detailed analytical principles of various theoretical approaches—for example, grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006).

A basic consideration in organizing one's field notes is that the data that are originally recorded determine the quality of whatever is later coded. Coding cannot improve substantially the quality of one's data, but it can help get the most out of it for a report. Ideally, very early in the research process an investigator would have an awareness of the interaction between substantive interests, data collection, organization, and coding. A few comments about ethnography and the research process can help clarify what kinds of things should be noted and recorded in one's notes.

The process of conducting field observations and interviews is quite complex, and there are a number of fine references elaborating on it (Denzin, 1989; Douglas, 1976; Johnson, 1975; Jorgensen, 1989). What we wish to stress here is that the researcher should be as close as possible to the setting and its activities under investigation. Learn the language, perspectives, routines, and practical considerations to determine "how" people do things and "what" they actually do. Experience them and avoid, until much later in the study, the question of "why" people do the things they do. This will usually become clear later. Meanwhile, one takes notes, and the best notes are descriptions and very rich in detail. Notes should not be taken to be significant or important for others but simply as a good chronicle of what was done, seen, heard, and even felt.

Notes should be completed as quickly as possible after leaving the setting or when the opportunity permits. In general, we have found that it is a good idea to avoid taking notes in the presence of the members one is studying. It is better to jot down on a note card an occasional keyword or phrase that will jog one's memory later. It is more important not to miss the various social activities than to chronicle some in preference to others. Notes can also include questions to oneself, points of confusion. Never avoid putting something down because it is not understood well enough, even though many of your initial observations will later be revised and even rejected as you understand more about the setting and activities.

Note cards can be consulted when one is more relaxed to complete and round up one's field notes for the day. These should include details on relevant items, including a list of the socially relevant categories (as we anticipate coding!) listed in the next section. Most researchers will develop their own style of note taking and recording, but many agree that recording them in a chronological manner can be helpful. Our students agree that it is also helpful to make comments in a separate part of one's notes for the day about the research process, difficulties, uncertainties, and practical problems—for example, "I couldn't pay attention to what *X* was saying because I had to go to the bathroom."

Accounting for Substance

Even though field notes are very specific and should not be enslaved to abstract concepts and theoretical issues in the day-to-day observations, there are some guidelines on the kinds of things that should be included. The following are generic topics that should be included in ethnographic reports. Each of these can be regarded as a guideline for both data collection and the actual development of research documents—for example, field notes, as well as categories and codes for subsequent data analysis.

The contexts, history, physical setting, and environment

Number of participants, key individuals

Activities

Schedules, temporal order

Division of labor, hierarchies

Routines and variations

Significant events, origins and consequences

Members' perspectives and meanings

Social rules and basic patterns of order

Different researchers will develop individual approaches, of course, but the idea is that materials relevant to these dimensions would be collected and recorded in the course of an ethnographic study. This does not mean, however, that a researcher should begin with and be guided by such abstract concepts. Rather, the best ethnographic research is always very specific and descriptive. The relevance of what one should describe and about what one should obtain information will become clearer as the researcher consults previous studies and, most important, becomes immersed in the setting and engages in the members' world and activities. The point is that after several periods of observation and data collection, an investigator can simply review notes with these categories as a rough checklist of some relevant considerations. In this sense, the above categories and others that most researchers will discover become potential codes that can be inserted into one's notes as the study progresses. Such "tags" in the notes also provide a way for the investigator to check the relative amount of attention and materials available on different dimensions of the research project.

What follows is an example of preliminary codes or tags that we have attached to notes provided by Berg (1989). We use Berg's example rather than our own to illustrate the versatility of the coding categories listed previously; practically anyone's data can be organized by using them. The codes or tags used are marked with an asterisk and are in bold type.

> TIME: 9:40 I left the meeting with the parents' advisory group and Barry a few minutes past 1:00 p.m. I went directly to Eddie's Bar. After parking my car directly in front of the bar, I started toward the door. I immediately noticed Olaf hurrying in. I followed him inside the bar. ***setting** The inside of Eddie's consists of three separate rooms. The first room one enters is the main bar room. It is set up like a traditional neighborhood bar: one long bar counter (to the right of the entrance), a television up on the wall at the far end of the bar, and a few booths set along the left side of the room. To the immediate left, as one faces the wall with the booths, there is a doorway leading to a small room (approximately ten by ten). This room contains a small billiard table, a Foosball table, and five or six chairs and small tables. There are two large stereo speakers on the wall to the extreme left and a small DJ booth in the far left corner. The lights were very dim in this room, and the music being played (rock and roll) was very loud. *** atmosphere**

***participants** When I first walked into the main bar room, I noticed four very young looking kids seated in the first booth (they may have been fourteen or fifteen years old). I didn't know any of them. I continued looking for faces I recognized. At the bar counter several older men stood or sat on stools, drinking. Toward the back of the main bar room, where there were several small tables, I could see several more young-looking kids sitting around, some on the tables themselves, and others in chairs. I still saw no one I knew.

I walked through the entrance into the large room off the rear of the bar room. Sitting on what appeared to be a bar counter (much smaller than the one in the main bar room and not in use this evening) were three girls I recognized from Oxford High School. I smiled at them, waved a greeting and said hello as I approached them. One of the girls (the one seated in the middle) leaned over to the girl to her left and audibly whispered, "Do you know this guy?" The girl being asked nodded her head yes, and said, "Yeah, I met him at the school play rehearsal the other day." I walked on past these three girls as I spotted Audrey Miller drinking a beer and sitting on top of one of the other small tables. Audrey was sitting with her right arm draped over the shoulder of some guy sitting next to her (I didn't know him). As I moved closer to her, she looked up and said, "Hello, Bruce." Her eyes widened, and she appeared a little surprised to see me. She got up off the table and walked over to me. ***view of researcher** She asked if I was there doing research or just out socializing. ***member perspective** I told her I was doing research. She remarked, "Well, you've certainly come to the right place, this whole room is filled with Oxford kids." ***identity** She was just slightly slurring her words, suggesting that the beer she held in her right hand was not her first. She said, "I'll see you later," and walked back to the group of kids with whom she had been sitting. (Berg, 1989, p. 75)

The codes we have inserted in these notes are not the only possible ones, of course, because one's research focus will influence this. Regardless, the important point is that this brief description of a research setting has several clear components of an ethnographic study, and these can be pulled out and combined with similar codes to help analyze and then write sections of a report.

Good descriptive data on various dimensions of the activity and setting under investigation make coding much easier. Research documents should contain materials about the substantive interest as well as the research process. As noted above, planning for this will facilitate the later coding and organization phases of the research. All researchers should provide an account of the research act. This is important for reasons of credibility as well as validity (although some investigators are no longer concerned about this). It is also relevant for substantive theory as research methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Another useful strategy in coding field materials is to develop gerunds from the research materials. Gerunds are “verbal nouns,” usually identified by their ending in *ing*. They can be very descriptive, while also referring to an activity the researcher deems relevant. For example, in Altheide’s studies of television activities, numerous descriptions in his notes were tagged with gerunds such as *editing*, *filming*, *complaining about story assignments*, *goofing around*, *getting screwed* (usually by the news director). When the more action-oriented but still very generic *doing* is considered, then the field researcher is on track of the symbolic interactionist perspective, which essentially views social activities as accomplishments with a process. Thus, “doing nothing” is a meaningful category if described in a research setting, as is “hanging out.” Everyday routines in most settings can be captured in this way. Even if they are not originally entered as data, these are viable coding categories for most studies. These dimensions provide a quasi template for an investigator and a prospective reader of the report to understand what contributes to the definition of the situation, its nature, character, origin, and consequences.

Accounting for Ourselves

A key part of the ethnographic ethic is how we account for ourselves. Good ethnographies show the hand of the ethnographer. The effort may not always be successful, but there should be clear tracks showing that the attempt has been made. Experience suggests that there is a minimal set of problem areas that are likely to be encountered in most studies. The following list does not offer a solution to the problems that will follow but only helps provide a focus for a broader and more complete account of the reflexive process through which something is understood (Altheide & Johnson, 2011; Denzin, 1989; Douglas, 1976; Johnson, 1975). Such information enables the reader to engage the study in an interactive process that includes seeking more information, contextualizing the findings, and reliving the report as the playing out of the interactions between the researcher, the subjects, and the topic in question.

As with the substantive categories (potential codes), the research process guidelines can be treated similarly, inserted as tags into relevant sections of notes. Suggested items for locating and informing the role of the researcher vis-à-vis the phenomenon include a statement about topics previously delineated in other work (Altheide, 1976, p. 197 ff):

Entree—organizational and individual

Approach and self-presentation

Trust and rapport

Researcher's role and way of fitting in

Mistakes, misconceptions, surprises

Types and varieties of data

Data collection and recording

Data coding and organization

Data demonstration and analytical use

Because these dimensions of ethnographic research are so pervasive and important for obtaining truthful accounts, they should be implicitly or explicitly addressed in the report. Drawing on such criteria enables the ethnographic reader to approach the ethnography interactively and critically to ask the following questions: What was done? How was it done? What are the likely and foreseen consequences of the particular research issue? In what way was it handled by the researcher? No study avoids all of these problems, although few researchers give a reflexive account of their research problems and experiences. There are other potential problems that should be considered in one's final report and, therefore, chronicled in field notes. Douglas (1976) cautions us about problems of communication with informants: misinformation, evasions, lies, fronts, taken-for-granted meanings, problematic meanings, and self-deceptions. For example, the field notes from Berg (above) could be coded throughout the study as the researcher becomes more aware of things missed or misunderstood. Attending to these issues in a study does not make the study more truthful, but it only means that the truth claims of the researcher can be more systematically assessed by readers who share a concern with the relationship between *what* was observed and *how* it was accomplished.

Finally, these suggestions are not intended to describe grounded theory or any other abstract view of data gathering and coding, although they may be applicable, depending on the project and the researcher. Experience suggests that the analytic-inductive approach to grounded theory can be useful in general—but the detailed coding guidelines make the data-organizing process more difficult than it need be—and that some of the coding rules lead researchers to essentially ignore certain data that do not fit the pursuit of an emerging category. We believe that it is best to include all the data in one's analysis, although some data may receive more attention than others. Thus, we stress that *emergent coding* be the guiding principle. The first goal is to give an accurate account of the complexities underlying the simplest scenario, and only then is more abstract theoretical sense to be derived, including relating this study to others. Using indexing technologies will help integrate your theoretical accounts of mundane, but very important everyday life, which will continue to emerge, be reborn, and lead to new insights.

Over the years, Altheide has attempted to integrate the range of findings from studies on the mass media, and especially TV news, with the nature and significance of media in general in social life. The examination of non–mass media institutions, settings, and practices has been fruitful in developing conceptually informed glimpses of the impact of certain mass media effects on a wide range of activities. This approach also clarifies the relevance of a more general focus on the range of media that influence the temporal and spatial features of what appear at first glance to be nonmediated occasions. Such an approach yielded "format" as a common concept in a number of fine studies of mass media as well as other types of mediation. Looking for instances of mediation in situations that may not conventionally be associated with media principles and theory has led to settings and issues involving social definitions and applications of "justice," including TV coverage of courtroom activity, the use of "keyboards" and other terminals by police officers and other criminal justice agents (Altheide, 1985b), and modest contributions in understanding how the entertaining use of fear in popular culture also promotes the politics of fear that can lead to widespread public manipulation (Altheide, 1976, 2006). These experiences and the capacity to reexamine the data helped promote a more expansive conception of mediation that goes well beyond the initial focus on formats: An *ecology of communication* involves the nondeterministic influence of information technology and formats on social activities (Altheide, 1995). In brief, ethnography offers a perspective for analysis of human action in the field and in documents; the key is to reconceptualize the latter as the former. Documents remain to be discovered through the research process, a process that will undoubtedly encourage other researchers to reflect on the experience and materials and offer yet other ways for studying documents of our lives.