

Observing and Gathering Information

This chapter describes and illustrates strategies for observing and collecting information. Observing while participating is a primary method of gathering information. Participants also engage in interviewing and sometimes employ questionnaires. Human communications, especially documents, artifacts, and personal experience, provide further sources of information.

OBSERVING WHILE PARTICIPATING

Observation begins the moment the participant observer makes contact with a potential field setting. Aside from collecting information, the basic goal of these largely unfocused initial observations is to become increasingly familiar with the insiders' world so as to refine and focus subsequent observation and data collection. It is extremely important that you record these observations as immediately as possible and with the greatest possible detail because never again will you experience the setting as so utterly unfamiliar.

Unfocused Observations

It is important at the outset of inquiry to remain open to the unexpected, even if you have previous experience in the setting. Previous experience and knowledge may be inappropriate, somewhat slanted, or simply incorrect. If previous experience and knowledge is confirmed by direct observation, you will have more powerful, empirical evidence of these facts. If not, misunderstandings may be corrected and you will be in a position to make new discoveries.

Upon entering a new situation or setting, survey the general features of this human landscape. This is largely a matter of becoming self-conscious and disciplined with respect to what most of us do anyway in everyday life. Look for the main features of the physical land space: What kind of space (or building) is this? Is it typical of other buildings of this sort? Or is it somehow unusual? How is the space organized? Is the

space usual or somehow strange? What kinds of things are in this space or building? How is the space organized? By answering questions of this sort, you should be able to describe the physical contours of some space or building, thereby forming impressions about it.

The same strategy is useful for becoming familiar with and gathering information about people and events. How many people are there? Attend closely to how they look: What are their ages? genders? ethnicity? How are they attired? Can you see signs of social status and rank or visibly discern whether or not people are coupled or married? Is there anything unusual or striking about these people?

How are the people in this space arranged or organized? Can you on this or some other observational basis discern connections or relationships among those present? Are people, for instance, arranged in couples? in cliques? in family groups? or in some other recognizable patterns (such as age or gender)? What are people doing? What kind of gathering is it? Is this state of affairs somehow typical? Or is it discernibly unusual in some way? What feelings do you get in this setting? Do you have a sense of things that you are unable exactly to account for observationally?

These questions clearly do not exhaust the issues you should address. They provide a general model, however, of a strategy for asking questions about a wide variety of matters that may be of possible interest in human settings. Remember that, aside from gathering information, a basic aim of preliminary observations is to become familiar with the setting.

Your direct participation in the setting should be limited until a preliminary impression of what is happening begins to emerge. Ideally, you would be present without anyone knowing it. The key to this strategy, however, is to quickly achieve a "feel" for the setting and then attempt to fit in, being as unobtrusive as possible. This may, of course, require some involvement on your part. To refuse answering direct questions, for instance, would be considered rude in most situations and make you stand out. When in doubt about how to behave, it generally is wise to conform to patterns of behavior pertinent to your role in the setting.

More Focused Observation

Once you are more familiar with the setting, it is appropriate to begin focusing observational attention on matters of specific interest. What you select to concentrate observation on should be derived from the

emerging problem and issues of study. The strategy of focusing your observational field is to begin with the widest possible range of phenomena, gradually limiting your attention to particular phenomena. What, in other words, can you learn about this phenomenon simply by looking and listening? What you have learned then may be used to address more specific interests. In other words, previous observations should result in an interest in phenomena that you would like to observe in more specific, systematic detail. This process of observing, analyzing, refocusing, and observing again may be repeated over and over again as you explore and refine emerging problems and questions for inquiry. At the same time, of course, you are engaged in the collection and recording of potentially important facts.

My (1979) initial interest in occultism, it may be recalled, was in divinatory practices. In trying to locate a setting for this study, I came across book and supply stores specializing in the occult. Observation of these establishments resulted in lists of individuals and groups as well as references to a local "community" of occultists. Observing what this community involved resulted in a conception of a diffuse cultic milieu and social networks of groups and practitioners. Observation of these networks led to a notion of the division of this community into segments. Observation of these segments resulted in the identification of inclusive individuals and groups. Observation of these groups and individuals led to a description of distinctive beliefs, practices, and ideologies. In short, then, preliminary observations lead to additional matters of possible interest. Focusing on these matters results in the identification of still other phenomena for observation, and so on in what may seem like a never-ending cycle of observation, analysis, redefinition, and observation.

More focused observations should lead to greater involvement with people in the setting and specifically to informal conversations and casual questioning. By this point in most settings you already will be interacting with people to some extent. This interaction may be largely a matter of performing an assumed role and otherwise getting on as a would-be insider, but almost every occasion for interaction also is an opportunity to learn something, generally or specifically, about the study problem and questions. Inevitably, this tends to be extremely awkward at first. You probably will experience some difficulty attending to the performance of participant roles while at the same time engaging in activities like casually raising questions. To the extent that you are able to become comfortable with the participant role, thereby routinizing

its performance, it will become easier to concentrate attention on asking specific questions.

As with observing generally, there is a certain art to asking questions and engaging people in casual conversations (see Douglas, 1985). There are several keys to asking questions. Unobtrusive, casual questioning very much resembles ordinary, everyday life conversation (see Cottle, 1977). Your questions should be related to topics already introduced or suggested by the situation, context, and what has transpired therein. Good conversationalists generally do not violate the rules for introducing or taking up a topic, and they conform to similar rules for taking turns and recognizing the implicit right of other people to join the conversation. Certain topics, depending on the social context, are legitimate for discussion, while other topics and questions are inappropriate or even rude, impolite, or offensive in a given situation.

Questions about one's sexual behavior or preferences, for instance, tend to be legitimate only between people who already are intimate friends, and even then specific questions may be risky. Good conversationalists also know that license to ask questions and otherwise participate in the conversation frequently is earned by demonstrating a willingness, even an eagerness to listen to what other people have to say. Listening is the main feature of collecting data by casual conversations. Questioning, in this context, is most appropriate for getting people to continue talking; to suggest further discussion of a particular issue, or to direct conversation very carefully toward a topic of special interest.

INTERVIEWING

Interviewing refers to a range of strategies for more formally asking questions. As the problem and issue for study become increasingly clear and well defined, participant observers find it appropriate to use interviewing methods. Highly formal interviews may conform to a precise schedule of questions or take the form of a structured questionnaire.

Asking Questions

Asking questions is an artful activity. The initial questions you ask probably will be simple requests for general information raised as part

of ordinary conversation. While such impromptu questioning is invaluable for generally learning about the insiders' world of thought, feeling, and action, eventually you will find a need for more systematically seeking answers to study issues and problems.

To question people directly requires that you provide good reasons for doing so in most situations. You may be able to assume a natural role available in the setting while conducting interviews, but more than likely you will have to justify formal interviewing explicitly by acknowledging your research interests. Explanation of the research should be general. It is sufficient in most instances to say something like "I'm doing a study of so and so." If further information is needed, people will request it. What else you need to say will depend on the nature of their questions. Tell them enough to answer their queries, diffuse suspicions or potentially disrupting misconceptions, and gain their confidence. It usually is better to say too little rather than too much. This activity should be as unobtrusive as possible. Saying too much may lead to misunderstandings, apprehensiveness, suspicion, and the like on the part of insiders or otherwise intrude into the interviewing process. The more this happens, the less certain it is that what people tell you represents their true thoughts and feelings.

Exactly what questions you ask depend on your study problem. There are a general range of issues pertinent to most human studies and most model strategies. Spradley (1979), talking specifically about the "ethnographic interview," outlines several types of questions and principles for asking them. *Descriptive questions* are general requests for information about people, places, events, and so on (Spradley, 1979, pp. 78-91). Descriptive questions explore the general contours of some matter in fairly comprehensive detail. These kinds of questions commonly take the form: "tell me about x, y, or z, I am interested in what you think about this"; "tell me what you do when you engage in this activity"; or "that's really interesting, tell me more about it." Specific kinds of descriptive questions include

- (1) grand-tour questions—a request for an overview of some matter of interest;
- (2) mini-tour questions—more detailed exploration of a particular matter;
- (3) example questions—requests for illustrations and examples of matters of interest;
- (4) experience questions—queries about people's direct experiences or what has actually happened; and
- (5) native-language questions—requests for extrapolation or clarification of particular terms, concepts, phrases, and the like used by insiders.

In asking descriptive questions, it is necessary to establish good rapport with insiders (see Blau, 1964). It is unwise to pressure people and ask questions in such a way that they feel uncomfortable. It is useful to approach people by seeking their cooperation in helping you find out about something. Let them feel as if they have special knowledge and are very important to your study. It is helpful to have insiders repeat descriptions, thereby acquiring the sense that you are especially interested and want to understand them better. This also helps you get a second look at matters of interest and correct possible misunderstandings. And it enables you to check for the consistency of information provided by the person.

Similarly, it is useful to restate what people say, giving back to them what you heard. You thereby provide further indication of your interest, leading to greater rapport, and the person being questioned has the opportunity to correct, reinforce, interpret, or otherwise clarify things. "Why" questions and questions that ask people to explain what they "mean" should be avoided (Spradley, 1979, pp. 81-83). Questions of this sort tend to pressure people and convey an evaluative judgment. This may put insiders on the defensive. Unless this is your purpose, "what," "when," "where," and especially "how" questions are more likely to result in descriptive information. In explaining "how" they do something, for instance, people also tend to provide a description of why they do it, and what it means to them.

It is not always possible to avoid placing insiders on the defensive and still ask relevant questions. People sometimes take offense or feel pressured even when you are careful to avoid these situations. It sometimes is useful to place people on the defensive by pressing them, perhaps to test for accuracy and consistency of information. In some cases it simply does not matter because they already are hostile toward you. Pressure questions are risky because people are more likely to lie or refuse to talk further in this situation, resulting in poor information or the end of the interview.

In observing and conversing with people, you most likely will encounter descriptive terms—expressed in ordinary language or jargon—for people, places, events, activities, and the like that you suspect are composed of multiple meanings, parts, or layers. In order to get a picture of what this involves, you need to ask what is included or what parts make up a particular item. An important line of questioning pertains to seeking the parts, components, aspects, phases, levels, and the like of matters discussed by insiders. My (1979) effort to understand references to an "esoteric community," as noted above, involved asking