

## Notes, Records, and Files

This chapter presents principles and strategies for creating, developing, and maintaining notes, records, and files. Technologies appropriate for making notes and records are reviewed. A variety of basic types and forms of notes, records, and files are discussed and illustrated.

### NOTES AND RECORDS

Making notes, keeping records, and creating data files are among the most important aspects of participant observation. As you become immersed in a setting, there is a temptation to concentrate on observation and participation, postponing and neglecting to make notes and records. This is a mistake. The human memory, even one expanded and disciplined by practice in the field, is undependable. The longer you wait to record observations, the more will be lost from conscious awareness, sometimes forever. The value of getting into a routine of regularly making notes and records during or shortly after periods of direct involvement in the field cannot be overemphasized.

The type, form, and content of the notes you create depend on personal preference and style, the issues studied, the setting and situations of observation, and the technologies used. You should record dates, times, places; the statuses, roles, and activities of key people; and major activities and events. Casual conversations and interviews should be recorded. You will find it useful to make notes regarding personal feelings, hunches, guesses, and speculations. Notes and files may be handwritten, typewritten; recorded by still photography, audio-video equipment, and audiotape; or processed on a computer. Once created, records require organization and analysis.

Ideally, your notes would provide a literal record of everything transpiring in the field setting. Obviously, this is very unrealistic. You may have difficulty, especially during the early stages of fieldwork, even deciding what is noteworthy. Where, then, do you begin?

### Mundane Facts

An excellent place to begin your preliminary note making is with the mundane facts of a setting, those routine features that otherwise go unnoticed and are largely taken for granted. By describing the physical surroundings, the characteristics of people and their activities, for instance, you become conscious of even the most obvious features of the setting, and you can experiment with and practice making notes and records. While in the field, it is very useful to keep a running record, or chronology, of the highlights of participation and observation. Make at least a brief record of what happened, why, involving whom, where, and any analytic comments you may have about these matters. Even if you fail to provide detailed accounts of events, these notes will enable you to recall issues of possible importance later.

For instance, you might begin by describing the physical environment. What is the physical location? If it is a building, what is its layout and how is this space used by people? Likewise, you might describe the general social environment. How many people are there? What are the social characteristics of these people? Are you able to discern or collect information about people's age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education, occupation, and so on? How are people arranged in this environment? What are people doing? How are people related? How are their activities organized? Is there a sequence or a pattern to events? What are their beliefs? It is perhaps obvious that particular field settings will suggest many other specific issues of possible interest.

Hayano's (1982) early field notes from participant observation with poker players, for instance, were jotted down occasionally and somewhat haphazardly. He frequently traveled for several hours getting to and from poker playing situations. Eventually he decided to use this time for tape-recording field notes more regularly, comprehensively, and systematically. Altheide (1976) similarly used a tape recorder to note observations of television news making. After a day of participant observation, he would think aloud about what had happened, debriefing himself, and highlighting whatever seemed important at the time. I (see Jorgensen, 1979) usually spent several hours in the evening after a day's participant observation of occultists typewriting field notes. Like Hayano, my early note making was irregular and unsystematic. In making notes, I mixed descriptions of field observations and experiences with lengthy effort at analysis, constantly seeking to refine and focus the issues to be studied. Though rather crude, my notes resembled a report of findings, because they included much discussion of theory and data.

### Central Topics and Problems

After a brief period of fieldwork, you most likely will begin to develop a priority of interests. Questions will begin to emerge and guide subsequent participation and observation. While these matters may change constantly as you seek to refine and focus the problem of study, at any given time you should be able to identify particular topics or problems of special interest. Your note making efforts should concentrate on these matters, whatever they are.

At least until you have a more certain idea about the precise focus and problem to be studied, your note keeping should aim to be as literal and comprehensive as you have time, ability, and energy to manage. Do not be afraid to be flexible and imaginative in your note taking. In some cases you may find it useful to begin with a simple idea or matter of interest and see where it takes you. Matters that do not seem especially important at one point in time frequently become important or lead to the collection of important data later.

Making notes is not only important, it is exceptionally time consuming. For every hour of fieldwork, you may spend two, three, or more hours describing and analyzing what you experienced and observed, especially if you make written notes. Although you should not neglect fieldwork, note making and observation very much are interrelated. Making records of what you observed helps clarify and organize your thinking. It commonly leads to the identification of matters of importance for subsequent observation that have been overlooked or neglected. Conducting fieldwork based on these insights, in turn, will provide new material for notes and records, analysis, and subsequent observation.

As the issues and problem of investigation become more concisely defined, your notes should concentrate more systematically on describing these interests in considerable detail. You will need to have fairly accurate and detailed records of daily observations, casual conversations, informal interviews, and especially more formal interviews. Like all field notes, these observations should be tied closely to the reality, especially the language, of the people with whom you are interacting. Whenever possible, conversations with insiders should aim to provide a literal, even verbatim, record. I used a tape recorder, for instance, to create a verbatim record of tarot card readings. These recordings were the basis for subsequent analysis of occult divination (see Jorgensen, 1984).

In some instances, you will be forced to depend on your memory. With practice, you should become increasingly expert in recalling

literally the sequence of events, phrases of conversation, and even actual jargon employed by people. Recall is better within a few minutes and hours of fieldwork than over longer periods of time. Sometimes it is useful to make a few notes and then do something else (like sleep) before writing up these notes. This strategy may be especially useful if you are deeply immersed in the setting, because even a short distance from events tends to bring them into clear perspective. Do not wait too long, however, as after more than a day or two you will forget the details of most observational experiences. In recalling field experiences, it may be useful to transport yourself mentally back into the situation and imaginatively reconstruct events as you make notes.

Telling someone about what happened serves the same purpose. It is very helpful to have a friend, associate, companion, spouse, colleague, or adviser who is willing to debrief you regularly. Discussion with interested parties is especially useful if they will ask questions and raise issues for discussion. In this way, you may uncover neglected matters or unseen issues, gain a new appreciation for what has become routine to you, or simply have an opportunity to explore hunches and suspicions. The Adlers, for instance, spent many hours talking over their participant observation of drug dealing and analyzing these data by talks with their adviser, Douglas (see Adler, 1985; Adler and Adler, 1987). I spent five or more hours a week debriefing Rambo (1987) during her participant observation of exotic dancers.

After extensive participant observation with professional card-players, Hayano (1982) began to focus attention on observing and recording particular features of the field setting. He began to see such issues as how poker players selected card rooms and games, how they defined other players, playing strategies, norms of playing, and notions of luck and misfortune as central activities and issues of study. His notes consequently aimed to describe these categories of activity and the activities themselves in the ordinary language terms of insiders. In other words, Hayano carefully listened to insiders and recorded in their own words what aspects of poker playing were and were not most important, and the meanings players assigned to their activities. Public table talk was extensive in this setting and served as the fundamental basis for Hayano's observations and records. He, therefore, engaged in little formal interviewing of people.

Preble and Casey (1969) had been involved in the participant observational study of heroin addicts for a lengthy period of time when Preble and Miller (1977) set out to study the effect of large-scale

methadone maintenance treatment programs on the lives of addicts. They consequently were fairly certain of the basic problem and issues to be studied. Aside from being interested in the subculture of urban addicts, Preble and Miller used participant observation to collect demographic data: they counted the number of drug users in the area studied block by block and recorded the age, gender, ethnicity, and habit of addicts. Because they were interested at the outset in gathering this specific information, their record keeping, likewise, reflected a high degree of certainty. While recording specific information derived from participant observation and various forms of interviewing (casual conversations, formal interviews with key informants, life histories), this team remained open to the discovery of new patterns of street life. When you have certain information to collect, it may be possible to construct a schedule for recording this information, while using more free-form notes to record emergent findings that were unanticipated.

#### **Feelings, Hunches, and Impressions**

Participant observers find it extremely useful to note and record their personal feelings and impressions of field involvements and data collection. If only for therapeutic reasons, it is useful to note your fears, apprehensions, mistakes, and misadventures as well as your excitements, successes, and major accomplishments. It is also valuable to note guesses, hunches, suspicions, predictions, and areas of neglect as well as topics in need of subsequent inquiry. Notes about these matters tend to be extremely useful in judging the course of your inquiry, developing future courses of action in the field, and as part of making preliminary sense out of the materials you have been collecting (see Johnson, 1975; Glazer and Strauss, 1967).