

Week 2: February 1, 2008

Qualitative Research: Observing, Interviewing and Documenting

“In the fields of observation, chance favors the prepared mind.”

Louis Pasteur (1822-1895)

Terms and concepts you should know:

- Structured interview
- Semi-structured interview
- Unstructured interview
- Informal conversational interview
- Interview protocol (or guide)
- Standardized open-ended interview (a.k.a. structured interview)
- Closed, fixed response interview
- Thick description
- Fieldnotes
- Self reflective comments (respondent’s as well as researcher’s)

I. Observing a Setting—How do you start? What do you observe?

A. How do you start? In fieldwork and observation, the researcher must consider these issues in planning inquiry:

1. How do you define your site or other unit of observation?

2. What is the role of the observer?

a) Level of deception

b) How will you discuss your role?

c) Researcher’s stance: insider or outsider? Extent of participant observation

B. What is it that you wish to observe, the focus of the observation?

1. Person, organization, community, culture, event, or combination of these?

2. **Thick (“rich”) description** – a way to describe your setting: narrative details about context, physical description of site and participants, expression of emotions & behaviors of participants, spoken content by participants, social relationships of

participants, and the thoughts, opinions and reactions of you. *But it's also a way to organize your approach to observation.*

***How can “thick description” be a way to organize your approach to observation?

***Think about your topic—how would “thick description” apply to your topic?

II. Interviewing

A. Interviews can be **unstructured**, **structured**, or **semi-structured**.

1. **Unstructured interview** or **informal conversational interview** – interviews which are relatively unsystematic in order and wording. It captures more breadth and depth by allowing the interviewees to dictate more the course of the interview, like having a conversation.

2. **Structured interview**—two types:

a) **Closed, fixed response**—these are quantitatively structured interview questions where the response choices are determined in advance. They can also be used in qualitative research.

***Example of this?

b) **Standardized open-ended interview** – interviews that ask each interviewee a series of pre-established questions in a specified order. This is to promote consistency and comparability of questions and responses. The interviewer has a specific protocol, follows a script, and controls the pace of the interview. **Interview protocols (or interview guides)** are used to specify areas (domains) of the interview but the exact wording of the questions are not fixed.

3. **Semi-structured interview** – using a combination of two or more of the interviewing techniques above. *These are the most commonly used.*

*** In what situations would you use these types?

*** What are the pros and cons for each type?

*** Consider your research. How would you design an interview useful for your topic?

***Can *observation* and *interviewing* be combined in the same project?

B. Narrative approach

1. “49 Up”—Example of Narrative (Biographical) Interviewing

***Questions to think about “49 Up”

- c) Listen to the questions asked by the interviewer/filmmaker—the types of questions, and how they are asked
- d) What themes (areas or domains of questions) do you think the filmmaker had in mind prior to the interviews?
- e) If you were analyzing these interviews, what themes seem important to you?
- f) What other questions would you have asked the respondents?
- g) What do you think would be appropriate research questions for this project?

2. Components or Themes of Narrative interviewing:

- h) Sense of timing—chronological ordering
- i) Participant’s perspective of past and future events
- j) Participant’s reflection on internal thought process and emotional responses to events
- k) Transitional events, milestones, or turning points

C. Study questions for Creswell chapters:

1. Do any of the data collection methods for the five approaches seem more familiar or comfortable to you than others?
2. What are the commonalities and differences of data collection procedures among the five approaches?
3. Take a look at some convenient text (such as a newspaper article or a page in a novel), and think about themes that could be coded. Identify a central theme, then secondary themes that provide context.
4. If you were writing a narrative of your life begin, how would it begin?

III. Documenting, Part I--Fieldnotes

A. **Fieldnotes** are the notes taken during observation and interviews that serve the dual role of documenting 1) “thick description” of the setting and participants, 1) what is said or behaviors observed, 2) the thoughts, perceptions, and/or self-evaluation of the researcher.

B. What do you document? – using “thick description” to write fieldnotes:

1. Describe the physical setting so that the reader can visualize it

2. Write what you ask them

3. Write *what* the persons say and *how* they say it

***What's the difference? Give an example from your field work of what someone says vs. how they say it.

4. Write what they say they think about what they say (**self reflective comments**)

5. Write what *your* reactions are to what they say (**self reflective comments**)

IV. Study questions for Warren, C. A. B. (2000). Writing the other, inscribing the self. *Qualitative Sociology*, 23(2), 183-199.

1. What does this description of fieldnotes have to do with scientific inquiry?

2. What are the similarities and differences of the purposes of fieldnotes to what you are learning about social work practice?

3. How might fieldnotes fit into your Method section?

4. If you were asked to write a brief paragraph on your personal biases or hidden assumptions about your topic area, what would it say?

5. How much do you identify with the population you would be studying?

V. Review of Assignments

A. Developing an Interview Protocol - Assignment #1

B. Qualitative Research Exercise – Assignment #2

VI. Study Guide Questions for Next Week:

A. See also questions from last this week's readings

B. Grinnell, R. M. Jr. (1997). Content analysis. In *Social work research & evaluation: Quantitative and qualitative approaches* (5th ed., pp. 427-441). Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock Publishers, Inc.

1. How is content analysis different from the qualitative data methods we have talked about so far?

2. What are the “quantitative” and “qualitative” aspects of content analysis?

3. Think of an example at your field placement where content analysis might be useful.

4. How would content analysis be applied to observing the behavior or culture of a group?
5. Would content analysis fit at all in your project?