5

Observing and Participating

In this chapter we shall examine observational and participatory methods of generating qualitative data. The terms 'observation', and in particular 'participant observation', usually refer to methods of generating data which entail the researcher immersing herself or himself in a research 'setting' so that they can experience and observe at first hand a range of dimensions in and of that setting. These might include: social actions, behaviour, interactions, relationships, events, as well as spatial, locational and temporal dimensions. Experiential, emotional and bodily dimensions may also be part of the frame (Coffey, 1999).

As I suggested in Chapter 3, in practice, the method of participant observation is often one element in a broader 'ethnographic' approach, involving the use of a range of other research methods. Conversely, researchers may use observational methods without considering themselves to be conducting ethnography. For the purposes of this chapter, we shall treat observing and participating as data generation methods in their own right, without assuming them to be necessarily connected to any particular overall approach. Decisions about whether and how they may be so connected in any particular project need to be *made* rather than assumed, as part of the strategic processes of research design and practice.

Instead, the chapter is structured around a series of questions which researchers might usefully ask themselves to help them come to decisions about whether observing and participating are appropriate methods in particular circumstances, to anticipate what these methods might involve, and to consider what might be some of the implications and consequences of using them.

OBSERVATIONAL METHODS: LOGIC AND RATIONALE

Why might I want to use observational methods?

Why might I want to enter or participate in a research setting in order to generate data for my research questions?

What are the shortcomings of using observational methods for my purposes?

As with the example of qualitative interviewing discussed in the previous chapter, I do not think you should expect your answers to these questions to be easy or simple. However, as well as needing to think through the intellectual logic behind the use of observation, it is also crucial to recognize that conducting observational research can be very time-consuming and resource-consuming. You need to be sure of your reasons for doing it before making a major commitment. Here are some possible reasons why you might want to use observation as a method of data generation.

1 You have an ontological perspective which sees interactions, actions and behaviours and the way people interpret these, act on them, and so on, as central. You may be interested in interactions involving large numbers of people (for example a mass rally, a rock concert, a religious ceremony). You may be interested in a range of dimensions of the social world (for example, not just written responses to a questionnaire, or verbal responses to an interview, or written texts), including daily routines, conversations, language and rhetoric used, styles of behaviour (including non-verbal behaviour), the active construction of documents and texts in certain settings, and so on. You will probably be interested in the ways in which these social phenomena occur or are performed in the context of a 'setting', and you may wish to associate yourself with the tradition which conceptualizes these as 'naturally occurring' phenomena, because they are observed in a setting rather than contrived in an experiment or reported or constructed in an interview, for example. You may indeed be very interested in the setting itself, including its physical, spatial, temporal as well as social organization, for example, a pub or café, a town or 'community', a stock exchange, a music festival, a conference or meeting, a shopping centre, a classroom, a court of law, a hospital or clinic. If your ontological perspective encapsulates these kinds of ideas, you nevertheless do need to engage with criticisms of the idea that a researcher can 'capture' naturally occurring phenomena by entering a setting in this way. We discuss this further below.

2 If you decide to use observational methods you will have an *epistemological* position which suggests that knowledge or evidence of the social world can be generated by observing, or participating in, or experiencing 'natural' or 'real-life' settings, interactive situations and so on. Or, to put it another way, you may have a position which suggests that meaningful knowledge cannot be generated without observation, because not all knowledge is for example articulable, recountable or constructable in an interview. Such a position is based on the premise that these kinds of settings, situations and interactions 'reveal data' in multidimensional ways, and also that it is possible for a researcher to be an interpreter or 'knower' of such data as well as an experiencer, observer, or a participant observer. Indeed, many devotees of observation would argue that the researcher can be a 'knower' in these circumstances precisely because of shared experience, participation or by developing empathy with the researched. In other words, they know what the experience of that social setting feels like, although of course not necessarily from the perspective of all participants and actors involved, and in that sense they are epistemologically privileged.

   Whether or not you accept this notion of epistemological privilege, at the very least, you will probably hold the view that observation allows the generation of multidimensional data on social interaction in specific contexts as it occurs,

rather than relying on people's retrospective accounts, and on their ability to verbalize and reconstruct a version of interactions or settings. You may regard such situationally generated data as superior, or as simply different from a *post hoc* reconstruction.

You must, nevertheless, take on board criticisms of the simplistic 'standpoint' position – that is, that you are a 'knower' because you share relevant experiences, or because you have 'been there' – especially in so far as you cannot assume that your experience of a setting, and your social location and so on, match those of all others involved. After all, your analysis and explanation of what is going on in the setting will itself be a *post hoc* reconstruction. This raises questions about representation and voice in interpretation and presentation of data, which are discussed more fully in Chapter 9.

3 Choosing to use observational methods usually coincides with the view that *social explanations and arguments* require depth, complexity, roundedness and multidimensionality in data, rather than surface analysis of broad patterns, or direct comparisons of 'like with like' (such as the comparison of interviewee responses to a standardized set of questions). Again, as with qualitative interviewing, you are likely to build explanations through some form of grounded and interpretive data analysis, and you may place little emphasis on enumeration. In more of a contrast with interview methods, this approach is likely to lay some considerable emphasis on the claim that the data were 'naturally' or situationally occurring, or at least generated through a contextual setting, rather than clearly artificially manufactured or reconstructed.

4 If you have chosen observational methods you are highly likely to conceptualize *yourself as active and reflexive* in the research process, not least because of the premium placed on the experiential nature of this form of data generation. Most users of observational methods write themselves into their fieldnotes and into their analysis. Of course you must not under-estimate the challenge of analysing your own role in this way, nor should you over-estimate your capacity to empathise with or 'know' the other, simply because you have participated in a shared setting as part of your research practice.

5 In a rather more pragmatic sense, you may decide to observe and participate because the kind of *data you require are not available in other forms* or ways. For example, this may be because your view is that retrospective accounts of interactions are inadequate or impossible to achieve, or because the situational dynamics of settings are never fully reportable by people who have participated in them because they will only have a partial knowledge or understanding of them. If this is your argument, however, you must be reflexive and self-critical about your own ability to transcend the partiality of any perspective of a setting.

6 You may consider observation to be a useful technique to answer some of your research questions, or to approach them from a particular angle, as part of a *multi-method strategy*. If this is the case, you will need to think carefully about the implications of and possibilities for integration of methods (see discussion in Chapter 2). As I have suggested, where observation is part of an ethnographic approach, it is likely to involve other methods as part of the process. So, for example, it is common for an observer to conduct interviews with participants in a

setting – sometimes spontaneously, sometimes in a planned way – or to use or generate documents or visual data.

7 You may feel it is more *ethical* to enter into and become involved in the social world of those you research, than to attempt to 'stand outside' by using other methods. You must, however, be conversant with debates about the ethics of covert and overt observation, and about the possibilities for and merits of adopting different roles on the participant–observer continuum, and be prepared to take some difficult decisions and sometimes make compromises in relation to these issues (see Coffey, 1999). Observation is rarely viewed or experienced by researchers as an ethically straightforward or easy method.

PLANNING AND CARRYING OUT OBSERVATION

If you are intending to enter a setting or situation to carry out some form of observation, then you will need to prepare yourself not just for the process and technique of observance, but also for social interaction. You will be variously involved in observing, participating, interrogating, listening, communicating, as well as a range of other forms of being, doing and thinking. This set of activities, performed in a research setting, is often referred to as fieldwork. Doing fieldwork means observing all of the points made in the previous chapter about managing and orchestrating social interactions, albeit the nature of the interaction may be different. You are likely to find the process more challenging and exhausting than conducting interviews because settings, situations and interaction can be notoriously messy and complicated, with lots of things happening at once; your own role may be less clear-cut and will probably be subject to more frequent negotiation and renegotiation than if you are an 'interviewer'; and you may involve yourself in your setting for lengthy periods of time. Observation in a fieldwork setting can feel a more intensely personal and intimate endeavour than conducting interviews, and you may invest a great deal of yourself in it. As Coffey points out in her introduction to *The Ethnographic Self*: 'Fieldwork is personal, emotional and identity *work*' (1999: 1). Significantly, she goes on to argue that it is also physical work, and embodied experience:

> all fieldwork can be conceptualized in terms of the body. Not only is fieldwork concerned with the spatial location of bodies (the fieldworker and other social actors). It is also concerned with the interaction, regulation, management and use of the body in everyday social life. Fieldwork includes the observance and analysis of the body as an embodiment of culture. At the same time our engagement with the field is both intellectual and physical. We cannot divorce our scholarly endeavours from the bodily reality of being in the field. (1999: 68)

If the social, emotional and bodily dynamics present a major challenge, so too do the intellectual issues involved in generating data from settings, situations and interactions. You must, therefore, ask yourself some very difficult questions about observation to ensure that you not only prepare yourself as fully as possible in

advance, but also continue to take informed and strategic decisions throughout the whole process of data generation. Here are some examples of key questions – at the very least you need to work out your answers to these, and for most of them you will need to do this before, during and after the process of data generation.

Generating Knowledge and the Significance of Observational 'Settings'

Am I collecting data (excavation)?

Am I generating data (construction)?

What does my 'research setting' represent?

What is it telling me about? What type of data can it yield?

What else do I need to know?

On the face of it, the association of observation with 'naturally occurring data' fits better with the idea that a researcher's job is to collect or excavate knowledge, than to participate in generating or constructing it (see Chapters 3 and 4). However, many researchers who use observational methods do not view settings as seams of naturally occurring data ready to be mined in any simple sense, and especially not once a participant observer enters them, simultaneously becoming part of and transforming the dynamics within them. Some of the most significant developments in our thinking about reflexivity in research and the constructed nature of knowledge have come from the reflections of ethnographers and participant observers (see especially Coffey, 1999; Atkinson et al., 2001). There is therefore a decision to be made here, as indeed there is with all other methods, about whether you see observation as enabling you to excavate or construct knowledge and data. This will influence the way in which you observe as well as how you chronicle your observations, how you weave them into an analysis and an argument, and how you implicate yourself within this process.

The language used to describe the process of data generation in observational work suggests that it is located, physically in specific sites called 'settings' or 'the field', which the researcher enters, inhabits and exits. While the experience of doing observation usually does involve going, being and leaving somewhere, it is useful nevertheless to engage in some critical self-questioning about exactly how you are assuming your setting produces data and about whether all your data come from the setting. The way in which a researcher conceptualizes what a setting is, and in particular what its data generating capabilities might be, has important ramifications for the nature of the knowledge they can argue to have produced.

A useful way to approach this might be to consider how far the setting, as a physical and social place or space, encapsulates everything you are interested in.

What of interactions which occur 'outside' it, which may shape what takes place 'within' it? What of orientations or motivations, cultural rules, norms or discourses which emanate from 'elsewhere'? Will these be fully expressed or visible in the setting and in the elements you are observing within it? Are there other 'hidden' contextual factors? In other words, is everything that you require to enable you to address your research questions available from within your chosen setting, and can the setting itself be understood solely from 'the inside'?

The different possible answers to these questions will not only shape your methodological strategy and determine whether or not you will use other methods alongside observation, but will express something of your theoretical orientation. So, for example, in a rough continuum from interpretivist ethnography to ethnomethodology, here is a range of possible answers. You may be seeking to understand the setting itself, and to understand how it is organized or operates. You may see the setting as a specific or local operation of something wider (aspects of culture, for example) which is discernible, perhaps, in the behaviours, practices, perceptions and assumptions of people within it, in the interactional rules and taken-for-granteds which seem to be operating, in elements of spatial or physical organization. Or you may argue that the setting exhibits the micro-social order solely through the accomplishments of speech and face-to-face interaction within it. If the latter, you are unlikely to seek to supplement your documentation of the setting with methods aimed at exploring a wider context, but the other potential answers do not preclude that possibility.

Knowledge generated through high quality observation is usually rich, rounded, local and specific. All of the potential answers above suggest that it is contextual and situated, although they say different things about what the context might be and how we might connect with it.

Directing your Gaze

How do I generate or collect data?

Where do the data come from? What do they look like?

What am I looking for in the setting? What shall I observe?

Although the purpose of observation is to witness or experience what is going on in a setting, it is difficult sometimes to work out what to observe and what to be interested in. Doing observation can feel very unfocused and vague. You will probably be interested in talk, behaviour, interactions, layouts and spatial elements, appearances, physicality/embodiment, procedures and so on. But which ones?

If you reject the view – as I do – that it is possible to produce a full and neutral account of a setting or set of interactions based on observation, then you must work out how to tackle the questions of selectivity and perspective in observation, since any observation is inevitably going to be selective, and to be based upon a

particular observational perspective. The key to this is to try to understand *how* you are using selectivity and perspective, rather than to assume – or to hope – that you are not. This means that you must have at least some sense of what you are looking for in the setting, and some critical awareness of how that has informed what you have observed, and what you have found interesting and relevant.

You should, therefore, prepare yourself quite carefully in both an intellectual and practical sense before you begin your observation, and you can use procedures like those detailed in the previous chapter for preparing for interviews. As discussed there, you will need a procedure for linking your research questions to questions you might ask, or observations you might be able to make, in the 'field'. While your procedure for doing this is likely to be more fluid, and more ongoing, than that for qualitative interviews, you must nevertheless have some kind of procedure to help you to make situated yet strategic decisions – for example, about what to look for next, whom to speak with next, how to respond or behave in a certain situation, what to record in some way and follow up – once you are observing in your setting.

Do not over-estimate your ability simply to 'hang around' in a setting or location and to 'soak up' relevant data. As well as the intellectual issues involved in working out what you are interested in, and how to handle selectivity and perspective, this raises more practical and methodological issues about how to ensure that relevant data are generated during your time in the field. Simply 'hanging around' in an unfocused way can be notoriously time-consuming, unproductive, exhausting and sometimes embarrassing or risky. You will need to consider how you will generate data, or how you will ensure that you are in the right place at the right time to collect data and make meaningful observations. You may wish to use other data generation methods alongside observation. For example, you may conduct some interviews, or a focus group, or invite some of those involved in the setting to reflect on their understandings and experiences. You may collect or generate some documentary or visual data, for example, you might take or use photographs, draw maps and diagrams of spatial locations and events, collect newspaper reports about your setting, and so on.

While you will certainly wish to take decisions about these kinds of issues in an ongoing way as your research progresses, you must also ensure that you do think quite extensively about them in advance of entering your observational setting so that you are maximizing your intellectual and practical resources.

Finding your Observational 'Setting'

What is the most appropriate setting to choose?

Where are the phenomena in which I am interested located – in time, space and place?

How does immersion in a particular setting shape what I see, and what I do not see?

Locating a context or setting in or from which you will be able to generate data relevant to your research questions can be quite challenging intellectually as well as practically. It requires you to think carefully about what your intellectual puzzle is, and what phenomena you are attempting to investigate. Then you need to think about where these might be located in time, space and place. So, for example, if you are interested in the concept of community, you must think about where communities are located according to these dimensions. If you focus on 'public' settings such as shops, cafés, post offices, parks, and so on, at certain times of day or year, are you overlooking a central aspect of community which might be located in more 'private' places, such as people's households, or less tangible 'places' such as telephone conversations, or which might be activated at different times? As suggested above, your choice of setting will say much about how you perceive the social phenomena in which you are interested to be organized or made manifest, and it will also shape what you are able to see. As Atkinson et al. remind us: 'Ethnographic fieldwork, and the disciplinary commitments that inform it, construct the objects of research as well as providing ways of exploring them' (2001: 6). In other words, how, where and in what ways we look will shape what we see. We shall return to these issues in Chapter 7 as part of our discussion of sampling, but the point to grasp for now is that the choice of setting is not simply a practical matter, but a highly intellectual one which expresses core elements of your ontology and epistemology. Choice of setting is a practical matter too, however, especially in relation to whether your setting is feasibly and physically accessible, and this leads us into the next section.

Getting 'In' and Getting By

Can I gain access to the setting? What does access really mean?

Do I intend to be a participant, an observer, or a participant-observer?

You may wish to gain access to a setting which is 'public' or semi-public, such as a café, a railway station, a music festival, a village. Even in these cases, access may not be unproblematic. You will need to think about how far you can gain access to all the dimensions in which you are interested, because even apparently public settings are likely to contain regions or interactions which are out of bounds to the general public. You may also need to negotiate access as a researcher – rather than as a passenger, customer, audience member or resident – to these types of settings, and to work out in practice what that means. Where settings are obviously 'private' in some way, you will need to negotiate access with the relevant gatekeepers but again, as with public settings, you should not assume that access is either granted or denied universally to your setting. You must continue to use your critical judgement to assess what kind of access you have – for example, it might be full, partial, conditional, intermittent – and to which regions or interactions. In

negotiating access, and in trying to work out just what kind of access you have been granted, you will be focusing upon forming and managing relationships with others in the setting, an issue to which we shall return. You will also be thinking about what it is you are going to do when you get there.

At its simplest, the answer to this question requires you to select a role on the continuum between complete participant and complete observer, and to understand the implications of your selection for the research process and its products. However, this is not a simple selection to make – especially not in the abstract – and what is more you may find that you do not take a 'once and for all' decision about this, but in fact that you move between a variety of roles in any one research project for both intellectual and practical reasons. To begin with, you should ask yourself how far it is possible to be a complete observer, in the sense that you have no influence on the setting, or that your observations remain 'untainted' by experiencing or feeling what the setting is like. For many enthusiasts of the method, this notion of researcher distance or neutrality is not only impossible, but completely defeats the epistemological purpose of immersing yourself in a setting. In other words, you are – according to this view – supposed to know what it feels like rather than simply act as a detached witness.

However, you should of course also ask yourself how far it is possible to be a participant. There are likely to be various answers to this depending, in part, on what you understand by the term 'participation'. One view is that you cannot fail to participate in some form, and the problem is that you cannot control how your participation is perceived by others. For example, if you try to be nonparticipative, or neutral in your expressed views and actions, this may be interpreted in a whole range of ways by those involved – the point being that it will be *interpreted* and *responded to* in some way. Your attempts at lack of involvement in whatever is going on in the setting will have some effects and cannot be judged to be the same as if you were simply absent from the setting altogether.

So, if you cannot be a 'fly on the wall', can you participate in such a way that you effectively understand the setting *because* you are part of it? In other words, can you gain epistemological privilege by participating in and experiencing what is going on? There are problems here too, and you must ask yourself to what extent you are really in the same position, or have the same perspective, as others in the setting: are there some divisions, or differences of perspective or interest, between you and 'them', and between 'them'? The answer is almost certainly yes, and your job will be to try to understand the basis of those divisions. You may find it difficult to limit your participation, and feel you are getting too involved or risking 'going native'. These difficulties do not mean that you should remain undecided about your participant or observer status, but they do suggest that you are unlikely to be able to make a 'once and for all' decision about it at the beginning. Instead, they mean that you should keep it constantly in focus, and continue to consider how it might shape your data.

Coffey suggests a different and productive way of thinking about these issues. Instead of trying to locate oneself on a participant–observer continuum, she argues that we should be actively reflexive about the ethnographic selves that we create and live during and following observation:

> The choices between involvement and immersion, rapport and over-rapport, familiarity and loss of self are often too starkly drawn to accurately reflect the full range of chosen and imposed identities, assumed during and beyond the field. The issue is not necessarily one of conversion, immersion or not, but a recognition that the ethnographic self is the outcome of complex negotiations. Moreover the definition and location of the self is implicitly a part of, rather than tangential to, the ethnographic research endeavour. One of the strengths of ethnographic enquiry is the real involvement of the fieldworker in the setting under study. A weakness is not the possibility of total immersion, but a failure to acknowledge and critically (though not necessarily negatively) engage with the range of possibilities of position, place and identity. (1999: 36)

Identity Work

What kind of identity, status or role shall I try to adopt?

What impression should I try to create?

How should I act?

These questions all concern the 'ethnographic self' which Coffey identifies and, as with the participant–observer question, you will not be able to decide them once and for all in advance. They also carry similar difficulties, in the sense that you may be unable to control the ways in which your identity, status or role are perceived, and you may find yourself constantly trying to negotiate and renegotiate them. You will need to decide whether you admit your status as a researcher, for example. While most ethical codes would suggest that you should not conduct research in a covert or deceitful manner, and there have been extensive debates about the merits of covert or overt observation in the social sciences, you may find that an overt role is not always easy or possible to maintain. For example, if your setting is a busy café, or a railway station, how can you feasibly inform everyone of your status? Even in small groups, it is not always possible to preface every interaction or meeting with a few well chosen words about your role as a researcher.

You may, of course, take on other roles in your setting: you might join a factory as an assembly line worker, a school as a teacher, a club as a member, and so on. You will need to think about the implications of your role(s) for data generation and for your ability to move around in the setting. So, for example, a teacher clearly gets a rather specific perspective on classroom interaction. You will also need to think about the practicalities of adopting such a role: are you trained, can you perform the role adequately, will other characteristics – for example your age, your gender, your ethnicity, your religion, your known views or allegiances – influence your ability to take on the role or to be accepted in it?

There are of course other less formal aspects of your identity, status or role which you should think about. For example, what kind of demeanour are you going to adopt in your setting, and in different situations? How are you going to

behave? Are you going to be enquiring, accommodating, aggressive, reticent, garrulous, opinionated? What impression are you going to try to create? I am not suggesting that you can or should plan all of this in advance, and then simply act out a script. Even if you wanted to be that instrumental, the intellectual, social, emotional and bodily vigours and relationships of fieldwork will certainly inhibit your efforts, and of course you will not be the only person in the setting who is engaged in 'identity work' and in working out what you and others are about. You will make on-the-spot decisions about these issues, and sometimes you will act and react without make conscious decisions at all. But at the very least you should think about these issues both in advance and reflect about them as you go along, trying continually to be aware of your ethnographic self and to understand its relevance in the interactions, situations and settings you are studying, and for the knowledge and data you are generating.

Relationship Work

How should I go about developing relationships in the setting?

How can I gain acceptance?

How will I know whether I have been accepted?

What kinds of limits should I create?

How and when will I negotiate my departure from the setting?

Developing relationships in your setting can be very difficult, and the way you do this is likely to have significant implications for the kind of access you actually achieve. The development of relationships in your setting will, at least in part, be governed by a range of social norms. So, for example, if you are observing in a café or a railway station, certain kinds of sociability and relationship building may seem more appropriate to some participants than others. You may risk being seen as over-friendly, or intrusive, or suspicious, or threatening, if you approach strangers for a chat in these settings. You may be at risk yourself. Aspects of your demeanour, and characteristics such as your gender, will have a bearing here also.

Whatever the setting, it is inevitable that the researcher will get on better with some participants than others, and may actually be 'adopted' by a 'key informant' who might then introduce them to other people or regions in the setting. The advantages and disadvantages of using key informants are well documented in the literature on participant observation (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Chiefly, you will need to think about the implications of using any one key informant. So, for example, in an organizational setting, would it matter if your key informant was an unpopular manager, a trades union representative, a woman who had made a formal complaint about being sexually harassed by a colleague? Would your relationship with this person affect your

standing and credibility (and therefore access to certain interactions and regions) with other members of the organization? Whether or not you identify a key informant, or a key informant identifies you (for we cannot always make choices about this), it is unrealistic to assume that you can maintain a completely neutral stance in the development of relationships in your setting, and so you must think through the implications of forming specific alliances. You must ask yourself whether you have gained 'acceptance' from all of those involved, and what exactly that acceptance might mean. Your answers to such questions will of course be tentative, since you simply will not always – or ever – be in a position to know how others see you, but you should ensure that you continue to analyse yourself, and your interactions with others, so that you can make judgements about these issues.

Relationships in research settings are likely to develop and change over time, in some cases becoming very close, and sometimes becoming difficult or fractured. Researchers may develop friendships, or spend large amounts of time in the company of people they dislike, observing or participating in activities which they do not care for. Negotiations and decisions about relationships involving trust, respect, mutual disclosure and obligation are part of the process as well as shaping the process and, of course, the data. All of this needs to be 'handled' somehow, and the immersion which characterizes observation, often over long periods of time, can make it all feel very intense. The researcher has to live through and manage these relationships and situations in a process which is simultaneously personal, emotional, physical and intellectual.

As part of that, the researcher has to organize their departure from the setting, and from the relationships they have built. It is worth thinking through how this might be ideally handled early on in the process because temporal factors are likely to be key elements in the development and negotiation of relationships. For example, do you expect to terminate relationships once your fieldwork is over? Do you anticipate any enduring contact, and if so what shape and form might this take? You are unlikely to be able simply to execute a predetermined plan in this respect, because relationships develop in dynamic more than instrumental ways, and because you will not be the sole author and controller of them. So, for example, you may not want to terminate your contact with people in your research setting when your fieldwork is over, or they may pursue continued contact with you. You might feel a moral responsibility to maintain contact and perhaps to provide feedback or support, rather than 'cutting and running' with your data. On the other hand, people in your setting may feel they have given you enough, and that any overtures towards further contact which you might make would be ultimately exploitative.

However, although decisions about these matters will be situational and contingent, it is not helpful to begin your research without any clear ideas about them. You need to have a sense of what you will expect of yourself and others over time, so that this forms part of the understanding on which your relationships develop, and so that people in the setting can make judgements about what their involvement might entail.

Developing your Skills

Observation clearly requires a complex set of intellectual and social skills, and you will need to think about how you can develop these. Recognizing what they might need to be, on the basis of the discussion above, is an important start. You can certainly follow the advice about interviewing set out in the previous chapter, and in particular develop your skills in listening, remembering, balancing talking and listening, observing, recording data and making fieldnotes. Getting by in a setting may require you to develop specific skills for use in that setting, and will certainly mean you need to be able to interact easily and effectively with a whole range of people.

As with any research method, it is important to practise – perhaps through a pilot study – and to critically scrutinize your early attempts, so that you can develop and improve.

TURNING OBSERVATIONS INTO DATA

It is quite a task to turn, for example, your experiences of living and interacting in a setting for a year or so into 'data'. There is the problem of the sheer bulk of material, information, impressions, which you will generate, and how to select from it. However, also you will have to engage with the question of how such diverse, experiential and sensuous material, can become social scientific data of a kind which you can use to construct a convincing or meaningful argument. This is a problem for other qualitative methods too, but it is more often in relation to observational and participatory methods that researchers feel most strongly the sheer inadequacy of text and language.

Deciding what Counts as Data

How should I record my observations?

What should I record?

When should I do it, and how often?

In the previous chapter we examined some of the processes qualitative researchers should go through in order to transform interview interactions into what they consider to be data. These questions, about what count as data, how you produce and recognize data, and construct them in a form which you can analyse or systematize in some way, apply with equal resonance to observational methods. In fact, the issues often appear more complex in relation to observation, because the researcher may be forming impressions and developing interpretations on the basis of a more variable and sometimes less tangible range of interfaces with the

social world – it can all feel much more vague, fluid and arbitrary. Therefore, all the questions asked about what counts as data in relation to interviews (outlined in Chapter 4) apply here also.

Researchers who use observational methods, as discussed, are usually interested in non-verbal elements of their research settings as well as verbal interactions, accounts and discourse. They may also be more explicitly concerned with developing a reflexive analysis of their 'selves' and seeing this as part of their data more than is expected in interview methods, where immersion in a setting is not a defining characteristic.

The 'how' questions about recording observations are similar to those for qualitative interviewing, in the sense that you will need to make decisions about whether to make notes while you are observing or to write up 'fieldnotes' at some point following your observations. You might want to consider making audio or video recordings, taking photographs or creating diagrams. These decisions must be taken in the context of grounded critical judgements about what each can offer in relation to your research and its context, and what the limitations are, and you should retain a healthy scepticism, as discussed in Chapter 4, about the 'objectivity' and totality of some apparently literal methods like audio- and video-recording. You will need to think about the form of the data produced by the different recording methods, and about what kinds of subsequent analyses will therefore be possible. Your decisions will also be influenced by practical matters such as what recording methods are possible in the setting (for example, audio-recording may not work very well in very noisy settings, or may be forbidden), and what your role allows you to do (for example, an assembly line worker may have little opportunity to make notes or a video while observing). If you have taken the contentious decision to perform covert observation, then some of the more obtrusive methods of simultaneous recording will not be available to you. And of course your chosen method(s) will have an influence on your setting and the interactions within it, just as your own presence does. So, for example, your presence and role may be interpreted variously depending upon whether you view everything through your camcorder, whether you keep breaking off conversations to make jottings in your notebook, whether you are taking photographs, and so on.

Your chosen method of recording will of course influence what you are able to record. So, for example, a video-recording will give you visual images and possibly a soundtrack, but will not say anything about your own interpretations of the setting, your feelings about what was happening, and so on. Of course many observers use more than one method of recording, and most make fieldnotes or a field diary of some kind, which records their observations and interpretations in a more or less reflexive manner. Given the premium placed on the experiential nature of observation, it is vital to ensure that whatever data recording methods you are using, they do help you to observe, record and analyse your own role in and experience of the setting and its interactions. In my view, fieldnotes are essential for this purpose, whether or not you use other methods as well. Remember that if you are behind a camcorder making a video-recording, you will not also be in the picture. Although this seems obvious, the point is that the use of a cam-

corder may construct a rather artificial separation between you and your setting (we discuss these issues more fully in Chapter 6).

Substantive issues about what you record, in the sense of what themes you choose to write about in your fieldnotes, or where you choose to point your camera or your microphone, must be tied in with your research questions, or your intellectual puzzle, which means you must have a self-conscious sense of 'what it is you really want to know about', while you are observing and recording. Your preparation in answer to the earlier question 'what am I looking for in the setting?' will help you here and, as with qualitative interviewing, it needs to be a form of preparation which allows you to be innovative and flexible in your vision when you are in the field, rather than blinkering you by imposing a very rigid set of preconceptions. It is worth reiterating, however, that you will be being naïve if you think you can produce a complete or literal description of your setting and that therefore you do not have to prepare to 'look for' anything at all. You will inevitably be making a record of your observations which is structured around certain themes, issues, interests and ways of seeing. This means that you will be selective both in terms of omitting what you consider to be irrelevant, but also in how you choose to frame what you do observe and record. It is therefore imperative that you are clear about what your interests are, what your framework is, as well as how and why you are recording observations around them.

While observational researchers may use a range of methods to record or construct 'data' from their observations, including audio- or video-recordings, photographs, maps and diagrams, many would argue that their most significant activity is the writing of fieldnotes, so it is worth discussing this here.

Making Fieldnotes

How should I make my fieldnotes?

What am I producing? What is the status of fieldnotes?

Emerson et al. argue that fieldnotes are:

> writings produced in or in close proximity to 'the field'. Proximity means that fieldnotes are written more or less *contemporaneously* with the events, experiences and interactions they describe and recount . . . Fieldnotes are a form of *representation*, that is, a way of reducing just-observed events, persons and places to written accounts. And in reducing the welter and confusion of the social world to written words, fieldnotes (re)constitute that world in preserved forms that can be reviewed, studied and thought about time and time again. (2001: 353)

However, they point out that there are differences between ethnographers in their view of what fieldnotes represent, and how they should be constituted. This means that there are choices to be made. There is not simply one way to produce fieldnotes, and the choices which a researcher makes about them will partly reflect,

partly constitute, their methodological and theoretical orientation. So, for example, you may regard fieldnotes as 'raw data' which is gradually built up into a data set which you can then analyse, perhaps drawing excerpts from it for inclusion in your polished, written account. Alternatively, you may regard fieldnotes as more developmental devices for formulating your understanding of your setting, for documenting your 'hunches', and for developing and testing out your analytical ideas. You may incorporate your own perceptions, everyday interpretations, experiences and so on into your fieldnotes, or alternatively you might feel that you should keep these separate from your observations of others. Your decisions about these kinds of issues will be guided by whether you view your task as one of data excavation or construction (see Chapters 3 and 4) – whether or not 'the field' exists 'out there' ready to be observed, or it is constructed through your own observational presence, practices and products (Emerson et al., 2001; Atkinson, 1992).

How you write your fieldnotes therefore clearly depends on what you consider those fieldnotes to represent. You will need to decide whether you wish to include detailed descriptions of what has happened, discussion of your own feelings and impressions, your own analytical ideas, and so on. If you want to create a detailed catalogue of events, or your own role in the research process, then you will need to write fieldnotes at frequent intervals. Decisions you make at this stage will determine whether and how well you can 'read' (in an analytical sense) your fieldnotes now and later, and in particular whether you can engage in *literal*, *interpretive* or *reflexive* readings, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Whatever you decide, you will need to work out the best format for your notes, including practical questions like whether you jot them into a note book, onto scraps of paper, record them electronically, whether you 'paste-in' other materials, and so on. You will need to ensure that they are appropriately indexed and annotated so that you can retrieve, locate and contextualize them in ways which are consistent with your understanding of what they represent.

ETHICAL ISSUES IN OBSERVATION

Many of the debates about the ethics of qualitative research have taken place around the issue of observation and, in particular, the question of whether covert observation can in any circumstances be regarded as ethically acceptable (Bulmer, 1982; Homan, 1991). While choices about covert or overt observation are very important, these should not overshadow the overt observer's engagement with the more 'routine' range of ethical matters discussed in relation to research design and qualitative interviewing (see Chapters 2 and 4). So, for example, questions about the ethics of your overall research practice and where you derive your ethical position from, or questions about the way in which you build and maintain relationships in the field, the power dynamics which operate and your role in them, the issue of informed consent and your rights over the data and analysis, are all central in the practice of observation. Some are raised in particularly sharp form such as, for example, the gaining of informed consent which can be

very difficult to achieve – even for the overt observer – in a complex and multi-faceted social setting.

In observational research, then, all of the questions about ethics raised in Chapters 2 and 4 apply. There are, however, some additional and more specific issues which you should consider if you are planning to use observational methods.

Ethical Fieldwork Practice

How far is my fieldwork practice ethical?

What does ethical fieldwork look like?

How do I judge what is ethical fieldwork?

You will need to work out your answers to these questions in the same way as suggested in Chapter 4 in relation to interviewing, and some of the answers will probably be the same especially around how you ask questions and elicit talk from people you observe. As Murphy and Dingwall point out, 'research participants may experience anxiety, stress, guilt and damage to self-esteem during data collection' (2001: 340). Whilst this applies to interviewees also, the difference is that in observational studies people may be 'on view' for much longer periods of time and in a wider range of activities, and therefore the researcher's capacity to do harm in the process of data generation is greatly increased. Of course the greater time investment might allow the researcher to make better judgements about how to reduce harm, as well as giving them more opportunities in which to do this. Either way, you will need to be making very many on-the-spot ethical and moral decisions, possibly over very long periods of time.

The fact that observational studies often involve the development of close relationships in the field also raises some specific issues. Some of these relate to questions about reciprocity, mutuality and (in)equality in relationships. It may be inappropriate to assume that reciprocal relationships can or should be developed. The people you observe may simply not want that level of involvement with you and your research, and if they do, you need to consider carefully whether you can or wish to offer this, especially in the light of your 'ethnographic self' and your stance on exiting from your setting, discussed above. Murphy and Dingwall remind us that: 'participants may form close relationships with the observer and experience loss when the study is completed and the observer withdraws' (2001: 340). On the other hand: 'participants are not always particularly interested in follow-up and researchers must be wary of further burdening them with expectations of intense involvement, arising more from their own need for affirmation than from any need or desire among the participants themselves' (2001: 344).

Questions about how close your field relationships should be, and what

form they should take, may very well arise, and your answers to these will depend not only on what you think is good for the data set you are generating, and for your 'ethnographic self', but also on the source and nature of your ethical judgements which, as I argued in the previous chapter, you should subject to critical and contextual scrutiny (see Coffey, 1999; Murphy and Dingwall, 2001). In essence, you will need to develop a self-conscious and situated moral practice, rather than expect simply to be able to follow a code of ethnographic ethical conduct.

Gaining Informed Consent

Have I gained informed consent from all participants?

I began to outline some of the challenges posed by the concept of informed consent in the previous chapter, and in this chapter I have already pointed to some of the difficulties of negotiating access with every participant in a setting. While I would not advocate covert observation, it is important to note that apparently overt observational studies may involve covert elements. For example, consent may not have been gained from everyone, for practical reasons, and therefore not all participants may be aware that they are being observed. But also the observer may observe 'private' events and interactions, either surreptitiously or unintentionally, in an otherwise overt observational study. Just as interviewees may reveal more than they intend, to a sympathetic and empathetic researcher (see Chapter 4), so participants in an observational study may say or reveal more than they are comfortable with on reflection. You may have to make difficult moral choices about what you can count as data. You will need to be active in your assessments of this kind of situation, rather than assuming that advance consent, or consent from some participants, covers all eventualities.

Similarly, questions about confidentiality will need to be given careful and active thought. For example, your research setting is unlikely to be an entirely public place, where all goings on are entirely transparent and available to all participants. Instead, you will gain insights and knowledge which are not shared by everyone, and you will have to decide what to do with these in everyday situations, as well as in your data analysis (ethical issues in data analysis and presentation are discussed in Chapter 9). In some cases you will have to decide whether to proceed in an interaction as though you do not have a piece of knowledge that you do have, or risk breaching its confidentiality because you do not know whether it is known to all others. Proceeding as though you do not know something that you do may make you feel foolish, or affect your credibility with other participants. These kinds of decisions are not easy, and are always contextual. They demand an active moral practice.

CONCLUSION

Some of the most useful and challenging debates about qualitative methods have been on ethnography and observation and the issues they raise, and there is a wealth of experience, reflection and craft knowledge which can be drawn upon and learned from in this respect (see especially Atkinson et al., 2001).

In this chapter we have considered some of the key 'difficult' questions which are raised by observational methods. As with interviewing, it is not a method upon which a researcher should embark lightly as it raises a number of challenges. However, it can be hugely productive, rewarding and involving. In my view, it needs careful planning and preparation, even though it is a highly situational method, and most of your key decisions will be made in context and in action.

FURTHER READING

There is a great many useful accounts of 'life in the field', but the most useful general texts in my view are: Atkinson et al.'s *Handbook of Ethnography* (2001); Hammersley and Atkinson's *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (1995), which is a highly accessible and practical guide; Lofland and Lofland's A*nalyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis* (1984); Silverman's *Interpreting Qualitative Data* (2001); and Coffey's *The Ethnographic Self* (1999).