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Chapter 3

Doing

Introducing Ann and This Chapter

I found my way into qualitative research, as I hope you will, through the research questions I raised. When I first brought my twenty questions to Margot, she looked at me and said, 'Are you sure you want to do this research?' This was not an auspicious beginning. Margot went on to explain that the questions were sound and reasonable, but much too specific, too 'set'. At that time she had no idea how flexible I could be. Her point about the nature of the questions I asked, however, was to become one of the most important lessons I learned about data gathering. I will discuss these matters in this chapter.

In addition to the nature of the research questions, a range of experiences and personality characteristics also brought me to qualitative research. I have been a college English and speech teacher for about twenty years. My professional life consists of responding to written and oral communications. I have been trained to engage the other person's point of view, to understand, and to analyze. Your profession may have trained you in a similar way. Ethnographic research requires attentive observation, empathetic listening, and courageous analysis. Ethnographers must be good at seeing 'what's there', which sounds simple, but is not.

Another personality characteristic deserves mention. I love to work with people. This is no methodology for someone who prefers the peace and solitude of the library over the rough and tumble of individual and group processes. Being 'in the field' means that you will be spending vast amounts of time observing and interacting with a wide variety of personalities — perhaps not all of whom you will like. You do not have to like all the people you study, but you must enjoy being with people.

Qualitative research isn't for everyone. For growing numbers of us, however, entering a context with questions makes more sense than going in

with answers. This chapter focuses specifically on the tasks and strategies of 'doing'. The emphasis here is on the techniques involved in being in the field: choosing an observer's role, becoming an observer, conducting interviews, generating a log, beginning data analysis, striving for trustworthiness, and establishing a support group.

Participant Observation

The most essential means of gathering ethnographic data are looking and listening. Since all of us have been doing this all our lives, some of us may feel we're home free. Consider this statement overheard on the third night of the case study class: 'Well, thank heavens! I've finally come to an easy part in all this. Participant observation is a snap'. Well, it isn't. What the beginning researcher is about to learn is that an attitude of curiosity and a heightened attention are required in order to attend to those very details that most of us filter out automatically in day-to-day life.

For some of us, as we have seen in the accounts of previous chapters, gaining entrée has been a difficult, complex, and time-consuming process. By the time we are ready to begin data collection, we've made very important decisions about the research topic and site. It is understandable, then, that many people come with some sense of relief.

The stance of participant observer is basic to carrying out naturalistic research. Thus, 'participant observation', referred to by ethnographers as ongoing and intensive observing, listening, and speaking needs some explaining. At the outset it may be helpful to know that 'participant observation' is used by some researchers as an umbrella term for all qualitative data-gathering techniques. It is often used, however, to designate only one of the techniques. In this sense, participant observation joins interviewing, filming, and the analysis of written records as well as the study of other artifacts (Wolcott, 1988, p. 192). We use the term in the latter way and will discuss the various tasks and strategies of participant observation as systematically as possible.

Participant observation covers a broad continuum of kinds and degrees of participating. We will look at that continuum more closely at the beginning of the next section. Here, however, I would like to emphasize the point Lofland and Lofland (1984) make regarding 'the mutuality of participant observation and intensive interviewing':

> Classic participant observation ... always involves the interweaving of looking and listening ... of watching and asking — and some of that listening and asking may approach or be identical to intensive interviewing. Conversely, intensive interview studies may involve repeated and prolonged

> contact between researchers and informants, sometimes extending over a [illegible] with considerable mutual involvement in personal lives — a characteristic often considered a hallmark of participant observation. (p. [illegible])

It seems that at least one student in each of our qualitative research semesters walks in 'knowing' that the intensive interview is her or his method of choice. Usually it is a surprise for this student, and sometimes it is an annoyance, that we hold firm to our view that interviewing cannot be divorced from looking, interacting, and attending to more than the actual interview words and that, because of this, all aspects of both techniques must be learned.

Steve Spitz provides a case in point. His was an ethnographic interview study of men who were the major caregivers of their children. Here he describes how observation served his interviews and so, his study:

> Observing Barry's children's drawings on his apartment walls, having Mark proudly point to a plaque that his wife received for community service, feeling Bob's warm glow as his son sidled up next to me during our first interview were an indispensable part of the research and again confirmed my feelings about the value of the naturalistic mode of inquiry. Bob's son sitting next to me precipitated a discussion about his thoughts about his influence on his son. These experiences were an integral part of the study and provided some of the triangulating data. A different research method may well have missed these invaluable pieces of data.

We have, in a certain sense, all been doing participant observation to various extents all our lives. Remember Hilary Knatz's feeling when first becoming acquainted with the characteristics of qualitative research? 'I've been doing this all my life.... I had a pretty fine tuned instrument in my own observational skills'. Spradley (1980) likens participant observation to what we do when we encounter the unfamiliar social situation. He gives this example from his own life:

> I recall the day I was inducted into the United States Army. I reported to the induction center feeling like a stranger among all the other draftees and military personnel. As I took the oath of allegiance, underwent a physical exam, listened to orientation lectures, and left for Fort Ord, California, I frequently felt at a loss as to how to conduct myself. Because I could not participate with the ease of someone who had done prior service, I adapted by watching carefully what other people said and did. During the early weeks of basic training I continued to act much like a participant observer, trying to learn how to behave as a private in the Army. When walking about Fort Ord, I would watch other people to see if they saluted

> passing cars or people who looked like officers. Taking my cue from
> [illegible]
> Army life, felt less like a stranger, and became an ordinary participant who gave little thought to the social situations I encountered. (p. 53)

Perhaps the essence of the difference between being a participant-observer in ordinary life and being one as a qualitative researcher is found in Spradley's final phrase: '. . . and became an ordinary participant who gave little thought to the social situations I encountered'. Wolcott (1988) says:

> We are ethnographic observers when we are attending to the cultural context of the behavior we are engaging in or observing, and when we are looking for those mutually understood sets of expectations and explanations that enable us to interpret what is occurring and what meanings are probably being attributed by others present. (p. 193)

The distinguishing characteristic, then, of being a participant observer is that it demands a shift of attention. This shift shows itself in a variety of ways:

> The role of participant observer will vary from one social situation to another, and each investigator has to allow the way he or she works to evolve. But as your role develops, you will have to maintain a *dual purpose*: You will want to seek to participate and to watch yourself and others at the same time. Make yourself *explicitly aware* of things that others take for granted. It will be important to take mental pictures with a *wide-angle lens*, looking beyond your immediate focus of activity. You will experience the feeling of being both an *insider* and *outsider* simultaneously. As you participate in routine activities, you will need to engage in *introspection* to more fully understand your experiences. And finally, you will need to *keep a record* of what you see and experience. These six features of the participant-observer role distinguish it from what you already know as an ordinary participant. (Spradley, 1980, p. 58)

It seems safe to say that even though these features sound evident, their skillful application and orchestration remain the ongoing challenge of each participant observer. For us, the hard-won bonus is to see far more than we ever expected.

Choosing a Participant Observer Role

Perhaps one of the first questions the researcher raises is what kind of observer role would be appropriate to the field and both physically as well as

emotionally possible. While they provide different labels for the continuum, experts (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982; Patton, 1980; Spradley, 1980; Wolcott, 1988; and Yin, 1984) agree that the meaning of participant-observer ranges from full participant, that is, actually living and working in the field as a member of the group over an extended period of time, to mute observer, who attempts to replicate the fly on the wall. Researchers generally find a level somewhere between these two extremes.

Wolcott (1988) distinguishes three different participant-observer styles: the active participant, the privileged observer, and the limited observer. The active participant has a job to do in the setting in addition to the research; the privileged observer is someone who is known and trusted and given easy access to information about the context; and the limited observer, the role most of us play, observes, asks questions, and builds trust over time, but doesn't have a public role other than researcher. Taking on any one of these styles depends on the opportunities the setting provides as well as the researcher's abilities and desire to do so (p. 194).

> Even if we could assume that every ethnographer was equally capable of getting as involved as he or she wanted, and of always having an exquisite sense of just how involved that should be, there are other constraints on the extent to which one can engage in or observe human behavior. (Wolcott, p. 193)

Wolcott here alludes to institutional constraints, such as those imposed particularly by the strict rules of schools. It follows that each researcher has the job of defining what the term 'participant-observer' means within the particular circumstances of a specific study, and to make that public:

> I think it is fair to ask anyone who claims title as a participant-observer to provide a fuller description about how each facet — participant, observer, and the precarious nexus between them — is to be played out in an actual research setting. (Wolcott, p. 193)

Even when the participant-observer role has been carefully planned, there are often unexpected snags. Laura Berns, for example, planned to be a privileged observer with access to files and personnel. She had been a teacher in a computer lab similar to the one she wished to observe and had experience interacting with students there. She was known and trusted by the people who were in charge of the computer lab. They welcomed her and told her that she had unlimited access to the lab, students, teachers, and files. Her start, however, was more like that of a limited observer.

> I have always hated knocking on doors and asking strangers to buy Girl Scout cookies. And then yesterday afternoon, starting my first

> observation in the computer lab, I felt an intruder really. This is not what I had planned or expected. I had entered a tiny room so cluttered with college students busily typing papers that not a single seat was vacant. So I dragged in a folding chair and sat awkwardly for the first half hour in the center of the room, gripping my spiral notebook and trying to look inconspicuous, as students detoured around me on their way to and from the printer.

Matt Cariello planned to be an active participant. He intended to study himself as a poet in the schools in interaction with groups of children. Matt learned a painful lesson:

> I couldn't seem to establish rapport with one class. Ms X seemed to be skeptical about my teaching methods. She would ask me in the middle of a poetry lesson '*What* do you want them to do?' in a loud voice that made every child sit up and wonder. She would question my use of certain poems. But worst of all were the faces she made while listening to me and the class — screwed up expressions of who knows what — and head shaking and sighing. The class seemed confused most of the time, as if they never quite knew what was happening. Soon after, the other teacher, with whom I had had excellent rapport, became critical of what I did in her class.
>
> I was being treated as an outsider, and a dangerous one at that. Any trust I thought I had developed was apparently an illusion.

Matt left this site to find another more amenable to his study. That decision was not made lightly:

> Naturalistic research lets you explore those things that arise naturally in social situations, but you have to remember that 'arise naturally' means 'arise naturally to the peculiar perceptions of any particular observer'. The emphasis is inevitably placed on the researcher as an instrument of observation. Unfortunately (or fortunately) this means that researchers — particularly participant-observers — are always subject to the influence of their own personality and the personality of others.
>
> 'Getting along' with a group may be a problematic thing. Enough becomes enough when your research is clouded by the compromises you have to make in order to get along with the group.

On reflection, Matt decided that while he did receive permission from administrators, he had not communicated well enough with the teachers at the outset:

> One of the major problems was that they didn't know what I was doing there — and I never bothered to tell them in any formal,

> coherent way. Now if I had made clear what I was doing right at the start, and had provided them with the background necessary to understand my interests, and if they had said at that point, 'Sorry, this isn't for us' — fine. I would have found another school. Because I didn't, I wasted valuable time, but not without learning.

As Matt's vignette points out, sometimes we may spend some time in the field and then realize that it is necessary to change sites.

Not all active participants have such difficulties. Diane, for example, was both teacher and researcher of the children whose play styles she documented. It took careful planning to fulfill both roles and Diane still talks of having to be sure 'which hat I was wearing when'. Diane had the good fortune to work with a supportive and understanding school aide. In addition, she had permission to do videotaping and audiotaping so that she could review daily happenings in the relative peace and quiet of her home. She had explained her project to the children and in time they became so involved that they often swept her along with them to where they thought interesting things were happening on the playground and in their homes.

Francia Mercado planned to do her study in the limited-observer role. She found this role difficult to maintain, and shares some of her concerns about 'intruding' as a participant-observer:

> To observe is an unintrusive role. All my training has been geared to an active, participatory role. I'm an extrovert and I'm very social. Being a Latin, I even communicate with my hands. I must control all these feelings. Here I am sitting with a pad and a pencil. The action is out there and I cannot participate.

Ah! But Francia *is* participating. Heisenberg's work tells us that the very act of observing can alter what is being observed. It follows, then, that even at our most unintrusive, we influence the very phenomenon we are studying. This is true of every research paradigm, quantitative and qualitative. For qualitative researchers the important issues are: (1) that we participate as closely as possible in line with the needs of our study; (2) that we make ourselves as aware as possible of the ripples caused by our participation; (3) that we attempt to counter those ripples that might hinder the participant observer relationship and, hence, the study; and (4) that we describe in the report both what worked and what did not. The researcher's growing self-awareness of this process is discussed in depth in Theme II of Chapter 6, 'The Transactional Nature of the Research Process'.

Beginning Observation with Wide Focus

In the beginning, participant observation can be overwhelming in the very richness and complexity that is being played out. Often how much to observe and then to record perplexes novice participant-observers:

> I'm watching the children! I'm watching the teacher! There are so many things going on at the same time! My head is spinning! What should I write in my log? What should I leave out? And to top it all it's just impossible. The minute I put my head down to write, I'm disconnected from what's happening. And if I tune in to what I hear, I may lose an important thought. They didn't tell me that this would be so apparently chaotic and so unnerving. If I'm the instrument, I need to be sent to the repair shop. (Belén Matías)

Many experts, among them Agar (1980), Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Spradley (1980), propose the sensible idea that qualitative researchers proceed through a series of stages in observing-participating. These stages move from an introductory, general overview with broad focus, to one in which the researcher narrows the focus to very specific aspects of the situation that have called attention to themselves in the ongoing cycle of logging and analyzing the data.

It is true that no one can record everything in the broad focus stage. But then, it is not such a bad idea to go in with the idea of trying. Because this is so, you should plan to observe and write about as much as possible and not waste your time fussing about whether something seems trivial or important. The seemingly most mundane happening may be crucial in hindsight. In any case, it is impossible at the very beginning to judge whether what seems trivial or important is really so in the larger, longer scheme of things. Keep writing. Keep listening and looking.

We have found that it is useful to begin by selecting one task or question at a time. For example, Margaret makes a map of the site. Margot asks herself where she might best sit to achieve an overall view of what is happening. All of us have found it helpful to note public communications about rules and procedures, such as time schedules and signing in, that are apparent from the beginning. Spradley (1980, p. 78) lists nine major dimensions of social situations that might be used in the beginning phase to pose questions and guide observations:

1 Space: the physical place or places;
2 Actor: the people involved;
3 Activity: a set of related acts people do;
4 Object: the physical things that are present;

5 Act: single actions that people do;
6 Event: a set of related activities that people carry out;
7 Time: the sequencing that takes place over time;
8 Goal: the things people are trying to accomplish;
9 Feeling: the emotions felt and expressed.

The Loflands (1984, p. 48) suggest that participant-observers who are known to the people in the setting they want to study, who are in Wolcott's terms privileged observers or active participants, might ask themselves questions such as these all through their field experience:

> Who is he?
> What does he do?
> What do you think she meant by that?
> What are they supposed to do?
> Why did she do that?
> Why is that done?
> What happens after ___________?
> What would happen if ___________?
> What do you think about ___________?
> Who is responsible if ___________?

These questions and procedures are only some suggestions. You will most probably do well by deciding on some specific task or tasks that make sense in getting started as a participant-observer.

Becoming 'The Other'

Entering a setting with an ethnographic stance demands an attitude that puts us into learning roles. Agar (1980) proposes that we conceptualize ourselves through such metaphors as student, child, or apprentice (pp. 69–70). Many of us find it helpful in the starting phase to take on the student role in our work to 'become the other': to attempt to see life through the eyes of the person we are studying. Melissa Rose writes about her experience of both taking a student role and being with students in 'becoming the other'. She shares some insights and repercussions:

> I have, as music chairman and administrative intern, sat in the back of classrooms and observed teachers, but this was a totally different experience from that of doing qualitative research. As I sat attempting at first to empathize with both the students and teacher, it became more and more difficult over time to relate to the teacher and easier by far to 'become' a student, at least for one period a

> week. I could recognize this as the beginnings of 'going native', and I could realize how easily this can occur. More and more, as I watched a poor classroom situation I thought of it not in terms of ways for the teacher to improve, as I would if observing in a supervisory capacity, but rather how like a prisoner I felt!
>
> As a 'temporary student', I felt neither pleasure nor interest toward the activities that were being presented. The students themselves reacted in a variety of ways; the most common were passivity, socializing, or clowning. I, being there with the objective of observing as many details as I could grasp, had the advantage of being able to keep my mind occupied with the task at hand. On several occasions, I found myself thinking, 'Boy, is this dull. I'll be glad when this lesson is over'. Often, I found the adolescent socializing and silliness around me to be far more interesting than what was going on in the front of the room. Small wonder that the students felt the same!

Diane is particularly fond of the apprentice metaphor. She relates how she 'apprenticed' herself to the children she was observing by playing with them and learning to play as they played. In our class work, 'shadowing' is an exercise that helps many people learn to 'become the other'. In shadowing, a researcher obtains permission to be with a participant — one student, one doctor, one hair stylist, one secretary — for several hours as that person goes about life. The researcher observes, takes no notes until afterwards, and interacts just as little as possible. In every way, the researcher attempts to learn what it is to be that person. On pages 202–4 Dorothy Deegan writes of her shadowing experiences on police patrol. Finally, the concept of 'bracketing' given us by phenomenologists (Giorgi, 1985) speaks directly to taking on 'the other'. Bracketing requires that we work to become aware of our own assumptions, feelings, and preconceptions, and then, that we strive to put them aside — to bracket them — in order to be open and receptive to what we are attempting to understand.

Prolonged Engagement

Many of us worry that the events we are witnessing as participant-observers may not be characteristic of what 'really' goes on or may even be put on for our benefit just because we are there:

> Here I am, ready to take notes on what is going on in the scenario I have selected. I ask myself, is this behavior typical, or are they playing a part for me? They may be. It can take some time before their behavior is uninhibited by my presence. (Francia Mercado)

Qualitative researchers, of course, are to document what is really happening rather than what is being put on for their benefit. Guba and Lincoln's (1989) suggestions of prolonged engagement and persistent observations point to the most helpful techniques for constructing a view of the context in its natural state. Participant observation demands '... sufficient involvement at the site to overcome the effects of misinformation, ... to uncover constructions, and to facilitate immersing oneself in and understanding the context's culture' (Guba and Lincoln, 1989, p. 237). With the two intertwined activities of prolonged engagement and persistent observation, qualitative researchers work to be accepted and trusted in their roles, to construct deep understandings about what they are studying, and to have some basis for deciding what is important and relevant and what is not.

There really is no short cut and no magic. People who do not devote sufficient time, commitment, and work have been called to task by Ray Rist (1980) for doing 'blitzkrieg ethnography'. Qualitative researchers have to be there with all of our senses, with much of our time, and with a quiet stubborn streak that says, 'There is a way. Maybe we haven't found it yet but with patience and skill, maybe tomorrow.'

For many researchers, prolonged engagement with people creates an emotional attachment that is hard to break. Laura Lee Lustbader spent months with a young schizophrenic female, and she felt that she was in some ways deserting her when the study ended. Teri felt so close to her cops that she considered taking a job with the police force. Both of these incidents are more fully described in Chapter 4. Andrea Mandel hopes to follow the elementary school children she studied right through high school, not simply because she is curious to see how they turn out, but because she likes them.

For some qualitative researchers, long engagement also means learning to be sufficiently neutral so that the research can continue. Ioannis Afthinos relates what he thought was a professional dilemma and how he solved it:

> As a face-to-face researcher, often I was forced to keep a conversation going by talking about something the informants introduced not because I personally or professionally agreed, but because this way I could collect information relevant to my study. For example, I am in total disagreement with my participant's view of civil servants. Nevertheless, I have not mentioned anything about my opinions to Jim because I fear that this might make him unwilling to further cooperate with me.

To be accepted by the group as an ongoing observer, a qualitative researcher may offer to undertake some small tasks, as did Hilary Knatz in Chapter 2, but the ability to observe widely and to have the opportunity to make a few notes must not be co-opted by a willingness to be useful. Making

contributions of any sort is usually easier and more natural for researchers who are active participants and privileged observers than those who are limited observers. But ways can be found. One of our friends made a leap into contributing as a limited observer when she contributed a birthday cake for the children in 'her' class.

Inevitably, over the span of participant-observation we get to know and often care about the people we study. Because of this, qualitative researchers need to remind themselves that their job is to describe, not fix, not judge. For those of us in the helping professions, the temptation to go in there and make things better requires great resistance, as Jackie Storm relates:

> My analytical brain got in my way. I kept trying to explain *why* something was the way it was, as opposed to simply describing what was going on. Not only did I want to psychoanalyze the family I was studying, I wanted to play the therapist. Role conflict was definitely a problem. As a researcher I was required to observe and record what was going on, yet I constantly battled the impulse to play counselor, helper, and teacher. I not only wanted to tell the woman in my study how to fix her hair, I wanted to jump in and fix her life!

Prolonged engagement provides many surprises. In fact, the researcher often comes across observations that cast all the previous ones into a new light. One of the great pleasures in the methodology is that not getting what you expect may be exactly what you need. Jackie Storm, whose study was plagued by illnesses and hospitalizations both in her own home and in her subject's family, tells us of an insight that occurred almost too late:

> I felt I was sidetracked by some of the situations that came up as a result of the husband/wife relationship. At one point the couple had a fight and the wife ran away from home. 'Woe is me', I thought, 'this will spoil the whole thing because she's not available to be observed'. I failed to see that her running away was what I should be observing.

Jackie's insight parallels an experience related by William Foote Whyte in his Appendix to *Street Corner Society* (1955). Whyte writes movingly about going bowling on many Saturday nights with the 'corner boys' from the Italian-American slum he called Cornerville. He enjoyed the games so much, he sometimes felt guilty about taking time away from research. One afternoon, however, he was hanging out with the guys and listening to them discuss the team's chances that night as they competed for prize money:

> I recall standing on the corner with the boys while they discussed the coming contest. I listened to Doc, Mike, and Danny making

> [illegible] to the order in which the men would finish. At first, this made no particular impression upon me, as my own unexpressed predictions were exactly along the same lines. Then, as the men joked and argued, I suddenly began to question and take a new look at the whole situation. I was convinced that Doc, Mike, and Danny were basically correct in their predictions, and yet why should the scores approximate the structure of the gang? Were these top men simply better natural athletes than the rest?
>
> . . . I went down to the alleys that night fascinated and just a bit awed by what I was about to witness. Here was the social structure in action right on the bowling alleys. It held the individual members in their places — and I along with them. . . . As my turn came and I stepped up to bowl, I felt supremely confident that I was going to hit the pins that I was aiming at. I have never felt quite that way before — or since. Here at the bowling alley I was experiencing subjectively the impact of the group structure upon the individual.
>
> . . . I was convinced that now I had something important: the relationship between individual performance and group structure, even though at this time I still did not see how such observation would fit in with the overall pattern. (pp. 318–19)

Whyte regrets the missed opportunities to keep track of the gang's bowling scores during the preceding months, which he believes would have been a statistical gold mine. But more important than regret is his insight that if the researcher stays sufficiently with a situation, then what is important in the situation will unfold. The meaning of 'prolonged' in 'prolonged engagement' is different for different researchers. We talk more of this when we discuss leaving the field on pp. 91–93.

Concern for Objectivity

A great concern of many beginning participant-observers as well as more seasoned researchers is that of reaching for objectivity, although this process may be understood differently with time and experience.

> I knew I was biased and had to learn how to observe, understand, and not make judgments. (Joanna Landau)

In opposition to what many budding ethnography students believe, observation can never be objective and Joanna will never be judgment-free. This is so because observation comes out of what the observer selects to see and chooses to note. All we can work for is that our vision is not too skewed by our own subjectivities. And that means *work* for most of us. But this work is of a different class from that of striving to reach the impossible goal of pure

objectivity. The trouble is that, as participant-observers, it looks as if we are trying to do just that. That is, as qualitative researchers, we must educate and re-educate ourselves to practice detailed observation without reading in our own answers, our own biases. That process entails becoming increasingly more aware of our own 'eyeglasses', our own blinders, so that these do not color unfairly both what we observe and what we detail in writing. With all the striving to observe fairly and with all the self-awareness and introspection this demands, we are still subjective people doing a subjective job.

> We will never be entirely free of our own preferred ways of viewing situations and our own biases. We can, however, be more self-aware. (Gail Levine)

We have found it less rewarding to agonize about becoming perfectly objective than to do something about becoming more objective. One's own introspection in the log can be of immense help. The section about analytic memos (pp. 80–82) considers this in more detail. In addition, the feedback provided when checking with the people who were studied can be used as we attempt to see their perspective rather than imposing our own. Often, the vision of a support group is an important factor:

> ... with the help of my support group I began to learn more and more how to control my emotions in order not to undermine or distort the research process. (Flora Keshishian)

What Was That Question Again? Again

In this section we consider moving from a broad to a more narrow research focus. In Chapter 2 we said that qualitative researchers benefit from choosing topics that hold their interest, even passion. This interest-driven search led me, Ann, to study a microcomputer hacker in his home (1988). Margot searched for and found teenagers labeled homeless at a community center, and Teri recruited policewomen for her research. At that point, our interest and questions were broad:

> What is the experience of being a teenaged computer hacker? What is the life of a teenages labeled homeless? How do policewomen see themselves as professionals?

It was not until we began our participant observation that our ongoing study of the very data we were collecting helped us to pose more specific questions:

What is the meaning for Chuck of playing computer games? How do the youth labeled homeless avoid school? What strategies do the policewomen apply to work successfully in the streets in time of danger?

Spradley (1980) calls the broad overview phase 'The Grand Tour', and the specific focus stage 'The Mini Tour'. These metaphors are congruent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) conviction that, at first, the researcher approaches the study '... not knowing what is not known' (p. 235). Logic would have it, then, that when the reseacher knows what is not known, a mini tour is in order. In Margaret's study of the ways in which young students interact with a text, she was surprised to discover in her grand tour that the students' non-verbal communication might form a vital part of the study:

> It was not until yesterday, after studying my field log, that I began to think about how the children in our book discussion group signalled interest, even passionate involvement, with their body language. They sprawled, they leaned, they wove. They touched each other and me. Are these important indices of interest and group cohesion? A new slant. I'll have to focus on that in the observations to come.

Sometimes, indeed, the maxi tour helps qualitative researchers to make 180-degree changes in selecting their topic and in narrowing their focus:

> As I reread my log entries each week, it became increasingly clear that, because of this setting and my own fascination with people, my topic had changed! I no longer noted, in explicit detail, the computer programing functions being explored and how the students gained insight into how they worked. Instead, I was describing in great detail when students came to class, how they behaved when they entered the room, where they stood, what they said and to whom, and how they were greeted. It was this topic that intrigued and surprised me about this situation, not computer programing.
>
> The goal of any research is to add to our knowledge, to enlighten us. Therefore, it is important to be open to what is interesting and potentially enlightening about the situation being studied, even if it is not what was originally intended. It is important to allow for 'distractions', if they are important ones. I did not develop insights into how students learn computer programing that would add to the knowledge available. I did, however, learn a great deal about how students can be invited to participate in a class. (Marcia Kropf)

The process of narrowing the focus means asking questions, developing in-process answers and asking questions again, and understanding that '... both questions and answers must be discovered in the social situation being

... This cycle, this dance, is at the heart of qualitative research. What is more, sometimes our questions are about the questions the people we are studying ask themselves, tacitly or not, as they go about their lives. This makes the questioning cycle even more complex.

Because qualitative researchers depend on the field to help them ask questions, it is not a good idea to enter the field with questions that are too specific, or too tight, or too slanted. A narrow focus from the beginning may well limit what and how we see. Diane Person writes about how she set out to study life in a library:

> In my nervousness to be sure to observe the 'right' things, I used the American Library Association's guidelines, *Information Power*, as a crutch to say this is what I should be observing rather than concentrating on what I was observing.
>
> I envisioned a straightforward series of observations and interviews. I was certain I knew what I would see, and I never questioned my own assumptions about the process. I could not see why I had to look at all facets of the library program.
>
> My initial focus was narrow, and the more I looked at the specifics, the more the whole picture became fractured, remote, distorted. My actual observation experience was far different from what I had anticipated. I had to shed my long cherished assumptions and broaden my own perspective in order to see what was really happening. I came to the realization that the school library is a microcosm of the larger school system with a distinctive media focus. Now as I finish my series of observations I have a whole new set of questions, but not the answers. And the questions come from me — what I observed with my own eyes, from my own perspective, not from the library teacher I observed.

Diane's genuine account describes but does not do justice to communicating her real struggle to change her stance. It takes a great deal of integrity, skill, and will to change from 'I was certain I knew what I would see' to 'I have a whole new set of questions, but not the answers'. What is more, Diane was able to use her insights about what she missed to move forward rather than to be discouraged and dissuaded:

> When I look back on my period of observation, the things which stand out most in my mind are the things I tried hard to ignore: the girl who wandered about the room by herself picking up thumbtacks — that would have been interesting to pursue from the child's perspective as well as the librarian's; the excitement of children working together and discovering information in an almanac; and, what was the pillowed seating area all about, how did the children perceive it, how did the librarian perceive it, whose idea was it to organize the area? What I learned will stand as a warning for next

> time. I also think it [illegible]
> not my preconceived assumptions, to let the data and the questions emerge from my observations.

The issue of the research question is one in which there is a real difference between quantitative and qualitative work. Because we often inhabit worlds where quantitative paradigms have held sway, the process of allowing questions to emerge and to shape during the data-gathering phase, as exemplified in Diane's latter quotation, may not be well received. In such cases, qualitative researchers may have a problem.

> In my usual fashion I decided not to worry about the research question until the time came. But, from my first day of doctoral study, everyone advised me to select a research problem and questions as soon as possible. I wanted to do that, but I did not know where to begin. So I held out and eventually some people understood my dilemma and helped me plan a research process that was right for me. (Beverly Rosenthal)

This problem is parallel to, and a part of, the problem of the demand for a too tight dissertation proposal, discussed in Chapter 2. More of how to handle this dilemma will be discussed in Chapter 6, Theme II, 'Shouting across the Paradigmatic Rift'.

Interviewing

Qualitative research provides a great many opportunities to talk with people. Some interviews are done 'on the hoof' during participant-observation when the time is available and the spirits are amenable. These interviews are usually quite informal. They often flow from a situation, perhaps at its tag end, and usually occur with less prior planning than formal interviews, except for the planning that has been done in the ongoing field log analysis, to be discussed later in the chapter. Sometimes, in addition, they are the only interviews our participants can and/or want to give. We have had informal interviews in pizza parlors, dentists' offices, nurses' stations, around kitchen tables, on subways, and squeezed into the dress-up corner of a classroom for 2-year-olds.

Other interviews, sometimes called formal, are more planned and usually carried out away from the action, so that there is a chance to talk in peace and in greater depth. Some researchers choose ethnographic interviews as their central data-gathering method and do less far-ranging observation-participation, confining it to the interview situation itself. Whatever the kind