

# Qualitative Research Methods

Hazreena Hussein, PhD  
reenalambina@um.edu.my

2 April 2011

Faculty of Built Environment, University of Malaya

# Lecture Content

12.15pm – 01:15pm

- Ethnographic
- Participant observation
- Focus groups
- Documentary review
  
- Exercise briefing

# How does ethnography differ from observation?

‘Ethnography is the study of people in naturally occurring settings or ‘field’ by methods of data collection which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner’ (Brewer, 2000:6)

‘Observation is self-exploratory. The observer looks, listens and records’ (Silverman, 2006:218)

‘Observation as a research method is well known in the field of environmental psychology. It deals with how to understand what people do in particular spatial setting...’ (Golicnic, 2005:53)

# Participant Observation - Definition

- ‘a field strategy that simultaneously combines document analysis, interviewing of respondents and informants, direct participation and observation’ (Denzin, 1989:157-158)
- Social anthropologists do participant observation and write ethnography based on this. BUT Tim Ingold (Aberdeen) gave Radcliffe-Brown Lecture in Social Anthropology at the British Academy on 14 march 2007 on ‘Anthropology is *not* Ethnography’:
  - Easiest to think of ethnography and participant observation as the RESEARCH METHOD
  - DON’T WORRY about unduly about definitions
  - INSTEAD try to understand what this method is about and what data result

# What is Participant Observation?

- Observing
  - Everyday lives of other people
- While participating
  - By taking part in these lives
  - By situating oneself as researcher in the lives of others



Malinowski in field, Trobriand Islands, 1915-16, 1917-18

Main features – to observe from a member's perspective but also influence what you observe owing to your participation. Openness is essential when collecting data based solely on communicating with the observed.

# Why bother?

- By observing and participating in everyday activities of communities, researcher tries to decipher:
  1. The value systems
  2. Social structures (power, gender, class)
  3. Practices (what people do)
- Thus tried to reveal the CULTURE or CULTURAL SYSTEM
- Attempts to uncover PROCESSES and MEANINGS
- Phases of observation – become a participant and gain access to the site and to persons; becoming acquainted with routines and settings, observation should concentrate on the aspects that are essential for the research questions.

# A list of questions for self-guidance

- Viewing the sensory garden from the perimeter.
  - *Do the attributes of the sensory garden draw users into the setting?*
- Wayfinding to the sensory garden and back to the school building.
  - *How does the student recognise access to the garden and back to the school building?*
- Engaging with the behaviour settings of the sensory garden.
  - *Why/how is the student fascinated to engage with the behaviour settings?*
  - *What is the pattern of use?*
  - *Which area and behaviour settings do most/least students prefer and engage with more/less frequently?*
  - *Does the student identify any behaviour settings of the sensory garden that resemble to the ones at his/her home?*
  - *Is the student stimulated by the weather, artefacts and/or wildlife in the sensory garden?*

# What sort of research might use participant observation?

- Traditionally used in anthropology
  - For studying distant/'alien' cultures
- More recently used across social sciences for a vast range of studies closer to 'home'
  - Work place studies (for e.g. how an organisation functions)
  - Local 'sub-cultures' (for e.g. studying how a pub/gym/nightclub/shop works)
  - And many more...

# Participant Observation

- Usually a very popular method. E.g. I can just sit in the library??
- BUT
  - Requires huge time investment (can be boring/frustrating...)
  - Often uncertainty about whether you will get any usable data
  - Very hard to do it well
  - Deserve particular attention and challenging
- Limitations – strategies of participation in the field, the interpretation of data, styles of writing find more attention. This approach may be interpreted.

## 7 'issues' for using data from Participant Observation

1. Accessing the 'field'
2. Fieldwork
3. What do you actually do in the field?
4. Reflexivity
5. Ethical work
6. Data analysis
7. Writing up

# 1. Accessing the 'field'

- Access to communities or groups often has to be negotiated through 'gatekeepers'. E.g. boss, landlord, school management...
- Gaining access is already part of the fieldwork.

# 2. 'Fieldwork'

- Researchers using participant observation will often talk about their fieldwork, i.e. their time spent studying with the community.
- Researchers need to be open to different ways of constructing social life.
- Allow everyday actions of community members to influence the research agenda.
- Be attentive to safety.

### 3. What do you actually do in the 'field'?

- Make field notes and diaries:
  - Field observations (identification of the setting: where and when observation took place)
    - (user types: who was observed; gender)
    - (type of activities: what users were doing, how long they spent doing)
  - Attempts to make sense of these observations (interpretation)
- Write down everything in notebooks!
  - Index this material
- BUT need to make notes *surreptitiously* (acquired in secret means)
  - Don't stand in someone's face and write down what they are doing.

SYMBOL	ACTIVITIES	FEMALE(outline)		MALE (solid)		NOTES
		Studen T	Staf F	Staf F	Student T	
	Walking / Passing through					
	Walking fast					
	Walking together					
	Walking and talking					
	Walking with wheelchair					
	Stopping / Standing					
	Stop/Stand and talking					
	Sitting					
	Sitting together					
	Sitting and talking					
	Playing sensory equipment					
	Lying down					
	Singing					
	Walking with cyclist					
	Running					
	Walking with walkframe					

**Site:**

**Date:**

**Time:**

**Time scale:**

**Weather conditions:**

## 4. Reflexivity (Directed back on itself)

- Need to be reflexive
  - be aware of how our behaviour is being perceived.
  - be aware of how our personality influences our observations and interpretations.

## 5. Ethical Fieldwork

- Participant observation disrupts the lives of the research subjects
- Need to have 'informed consent' from all participants
- Formal ethical guidelines: Association of Social Anthropologists  
<http://www.theasa.org/ethics/guidelines.shtml>

## 6. Data Analysis

- Participant observation results in lots of unstructured data
- Distinguish observation, interpretation and reflexivity in your notes and in your writing:
  - What is interesting?
  - What is relevant?
  - What observations support a specific argument? (how do data link to theoretical questions?)

## 7. 'Writing up'

- Ethnographers have to use strategies to overcome *qualitative* nature of their research
  - Need to convey 'being there' to audiences
  - Need to convey 'authenticity'
- How?
  - Use reflections
  - Anecdotal evidence/Narrative

*It was windy and drizzly. A young girl in a wheelchair was in the sensory garden with her teaching assistant. She was wearing a pink sweater with her hair in a ponytail, which was tied with a matching pink ribbon. She was quiet and just sat still in her wheelchair, feeling the rainwater running on her cheek. Her teaching assistant kept on wheeling her despite the weather. At one point, the teaching assistant stopped to tie her own shoelace. The girl opened her mouth and shouted out loud, shrill noises while jumping a little in the wheelchair. She was irritated! The teaching assistant knew that she disliked that they had stopped and explained to the girl in sign language why she had to do that. After a short while, the teaching assistant gently wheeled the girl on. Passing the water feature and the scented plants at the raised beds, the girl became silent. Now the only noises that could be heard were the wind in the leaves, the trickling water from the water feature and a little splashing on a puddle.*

# Focus Groups

‘... a group of people are brought together to discuss a specific topic, under the discussion or guidance of a moderator, and the resulting conversation is recorded and/or observed’

(Mc Queen and Knussen, 2002:209)

‘The hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group’

(Morgan, 1988:12)

# Focus Groups

## Strengths

- Highlight social interaction, processes by which people form opinions;
- Can be easy to organise, especially there is lack of time to interview individuals;
- Can enhance data gathered through other methods.

## Weaknesses

- Groups vs Individual responses: reliability;
- Can be expensive, difficult to organise, importance of good moderator skills.
- Researcher has less control of the nature of the data gathered.

# Focus Groups

## Logistical Issues:

- Number of groups
- Size of groups
- Source of participations
- Level of moderator involvement
- Content

## Budget and Time Constraints:

- Selection of participants
- Organising venues, dates, etc
- Transcription

## Political and Ethical Issues:

- Recording data
- Participants all share information?

# Focus Groups

Criteria for effective focus groups:

- Cover different aspects of the same topic;
- Provide data that is specific as possible;
- Foster level of interaction that explored participants' feelings in some depth;
- Take into account the personal context that participants use in generating.

# Documentary Review

Text and/or images, including:

- Government publications and official documentation;
- Print journalism: newspaper, magazines;
- Records/minutes/ meeting notes;
- Letters/ memoranda;
- Diaries;
- Website pages.

Documents can be used both (and to varying degrees) quantitatively and qualitatively...

Keyword in communication – the frequency of most used words

# Documentary Review

Accessing different types of documentation:

Type of Document	Examples	Access via
Public domain	Books, journals, official statistics, some company records	Libraries, internet, office for national statistics
Restricted access	Medical records, police files, internal memos, personal papers/diaries	Negotiation with gatekeepers, sponsors
Secret	Cabinet minutes, accounting records from illegal trade, some corporate plans	Insider knowledge, participant deception

Source: Adopted from Denscombe, 2007:231)

# Documentation Review

## Advantages

- Accessibility – useful documents are frequently publicly available;
- Cost effective – many documents are free or inexpensive;
- Permanence – documents can be retained for reference.

## Disadvantages

- Veracity and accuracy – discretion required regarding robustness of source, i.e. internet is characterised by uncontrolled and unmonitored publishing with little peer review.

# KEY CONCLUDING POINTS

- Many different ways to collect data. Often multiple approaches are valid.
- Data collection strategies are shaped by research questions and ability of analyse.
- In qualitative research, observation can be used with different degrees of the researcher's participation in the field under study.
- Ethnography replaced participant observation, but it is a central methodological basis for any ethnographic work, ethics and forms of going native.

## Further Reading

- Atkinson, P., Coffey, A., Delamont, S., Lofland, J. and Lofland L. (eds.) (2001) *Handbook of Ethnography*. London: SAGE.
- Brewer, John D. (2000) *Ethnography*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Denscombe, M. (2007) *Communities of practice and mixed methods research: A research paradigm based on reflexive pragmatism*. International Mixed Methods conference, Cambridge, July 2007.
- Golicnic, B. (2005) *People in Place: A configuration of physical form and the dynamic patterns of spatial occupancy in urban open public spaces*. Unpublished Doctorial, Edinburgh College of Art, Edinburgh.
- McQueen, R.A. and Knussen, C. (2002) *Research methods for social science: A practical introduction*. Pearson.
- Morgan, D.L. (1988) *Focus groups as qualitative research*. Sage, London.
- Silverman, D. (2006) *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analysing talk, text and interaction*. London: SAGE.

# Exercise Briefing

- In groups of three
- Identify a research topic theme. It might be one of your group members' dissertation topic
- Identify the best way of collecting the information/evidence. This should involve both a consideration of sequencing of the data gathering exercises and how you propose to gather the necessary information
- You should categorise the information in terms of : primary/secondary
- Be prepared to justify your approach
- Presentation: 5 minutes for each group. 5 minutes Q&A