

# Recording Data in Qualitative Research

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# Lecture outline

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1. Note-taking practices, including the desire to capture words verbatim in the first place.
2. The use of other types of recording devices, such as audio- and videotapes, in addition to taking notes.



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**Written report of fieldwork**



**Analysis and interpretation**



**Field notes**

(Complete verbatim transcriptions, photographs, fully written field notes)



**Fieldwork**

(Gaining access, building rapport, participant observation, interviewing)



# What to Record- Trying to Record “Everything” versus Being Too Selective

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- Recording “everything” is impossible, but some people nevertheless take too many notes, well beyond the needs of their study.
- The burden of this effort is often transferred to participants, who must be asked either to speak more slowly or to pause while the researcher catches up with the note taking.
- The word of advice here is to learn how to record what you need without disrupting a participant’s rhythm or pace.
- As with the way you dress and present yourself in the field, the note-taking process should be another silent part- Even the physical movement used in taking notes should be as unobtrusive as possible. The other extreme presents even greater problems.
- Record too little and you risk being inaccurate or not having enough information to analyse. You might not even have a study.
- Between these extremes lies a golden mean. With experience in doing and completing several studies, every researcher finds her or his own comfort level.
- The goal is to take sufficient notes to support the later analytic and compositional needs, but not so many notes that much of your material will go unused.
- Also, having too many notes can sometimes paralyse you at the analytic stage because you won’t know where to start sorting all of it. Experience helps people to anticipate the most useful level of volume ahead of time.
- The golden mean then becomes synonymous with any given researcher’s “style.” Some researchers may be known to covet rich descriptive passages that emulate for the reader the experience of “being there,” while other researchers may be known to provide compelling evidence for highly focused research questions.
- Yet other researchers may be known for repeatedly discovering something new and fascinating that was not part of the original study plan.



# Highlighting Actions and Capturing Words Verbatim

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- What to record will be a challenge for experienced and novice researchers alike, but, for novices especially, some guidance can come from two strategies: highlighting the **actions** in the field and capturing words **verbatim**.
- The “first day” may be a full-fledged observational opportunity or may simply be represented by the first field interview.
- In either situation, you may be confronted by too much unfamiliar territory. You will have little idea of the meaning of many observations, including identifying who is who.
- In the interview situation, you will have little familiarity with the context for your interviewee’s remarks as well as the identity of the others who might be referenced in those remarks.
- The note taking under these circumstances can be more tentative and even fragmentary. The goal is to gain your own understanding of the new environment and participants rather than to take copious notes.
- “Listening” may be more important than “doing” and should be done with an open mind. In this process, an early challenge is to avoid premature stereotyping on your part, in either the observational or the interview situation.
- In the observational situation, focusing on actions that take place in the field, as opposed to describing a person or a scene, is one way of noting what is going on while minimizing the stereotyping.
- The aim is to record a **“vivid image”** rather than a **“visual stereotype”**.
- The vivid images can involve the activities of a single person, of groups of persons, or of a participant observer experience



# Stereotyping

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- The cognitive process of ascribing traits or other characteristics to individuals based solely on their group membership.
- people might use to make social judgments quickly, even if not necessarily more accurately.



# Highlighting Actions and Capturing Words Verbatim

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- In the interview situation, focusing on words verbatim serves a similar purpose.
- Notes from your first interview should have the specific terms, labels, words, and phrases used by the interviewee, not your paraphrasing and hence stereotyping of them.
- The desirability of capturing the exact words and phrases—as well as gestures and expressions goes well beyond the first few interviews.
- The more you are studying the culture of a place or group of people, the more important it is to capture their language.
- Culture, the knowledge that people have learned as members of a group, cannot be observed directly. . . . If we want to find out what people know, we must get inside their heads.



# Remembering Your Research Questions

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- Whether you developed a formal research protocol or not, your study started with some questions or main points of interest.
- You identified those points, as well as selected your field setting, only after careful consideration.
- Thus, you also can give these same points your initial note-taking (and question-asking) priority by giving more attention to those actions and verbatim words that appear to be related to your research questions.



# Note-Taking Practices When Doing Fieldwork

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## 1. Being prepared

- when you are doing your research you always should be prepared to write something down. You therefore should always be carrying some kind of writing instrument.
- Similarly, having a small pad (which could fit into a purse or a side pocket) or even a clean scrap of paper to write on also will prepare you for taking notes at a moment's notice.
- Over time, once you become comfortable with a particular type of writing instrument (e.g., pen or pencil) and pad, think about stockpiling these items for future studies.
- Given the small size of today's technology, the preparatory steps also can include carrying a pocket-sized audio recorder and a cell phone with photographic capabilities. You will then be prepared to record events in multiple modalities.



# Note-Taking Practices When Doing Fieldwork

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## 2. Setting Up Your Notes

- In spite of their seeming informality, initial field notes still should follow a certain format.
- For setting up your notes when doing fieldwork, three general reminders may be helpful.
  - A. you need to decide whether you are most comfortable taking notes on standard-sized notebook paper, in a bound notebook. If the fieldwork will involve a lot of movement for example, into and out of cars, this will probably preclude your using a laptop or small computer to take notes, as you may not find a stable surface on which to set the computer (the convenience of your lap disappears when most of your fieldwork involves walking or standing). You also will have difficulty viewing a computer screen when working outdoors.
  - B. Making a habit out of writing the date of the note, briefly identifying the person or scene covered by the note, and numbering all of your pages.
  - C. to leave deliberately empty spaces on each page . The space permits the use of arrows, brackets, and parentheses where the fieldworker wants to hypothesize some relationship either that will lead to an immediate follow-up question or that will be examined later. In your own notes, you may leave wide margins, write down one column, leave a second column open on every page, or use any other pattern that pleases you. Just don't fill up every page. You will find the empty space useful if you later happen to remember an item that belongs on the original notes and can then add it (with a different-colored writing instrument).



# Note-Taking Practices When Doing Fieldwork

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## 3. Developing Your Own Transcribing Language.

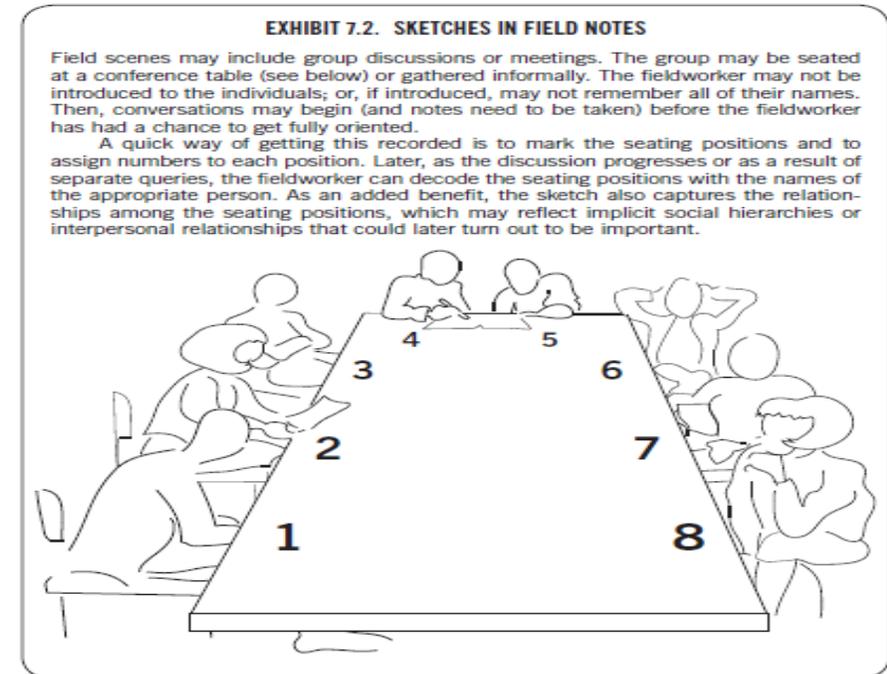
- The language needs most of all to have shortcuts that nevertheless preserve accuracy and precision. However, the language may differ sharply from your regular writing. To overcome having too many incomplete sentences or too much fragmentation (if not confusion) in your notes, you should try to find some time to make quick fixes while you are still in the field.
- Find a quiet place between interviews or observations or during a break from the fieldwork and look for those incomplete sentences or other fragments. Any fixes that you can make at this intermediate juncture will be much better than waiting until the end of the day.
- A critical characteristic of the desired transcribing language is to be able to distinguish (1) notes about others and external events from (2) notes to yourself.
- You will want to be able to make a brief note about what you have just heard or observed, but you need to separate your own comments clearly from the other notes. Using brackets or backslashes or reserving the marginal space for your comments alone, all will work.



# Note-Taking Practices When Doing Fieldwork

## 4. Creating Drawings and Sketches as Part of the Notes

- Field notes also can include your own drawings or sketches. Such renditions are highly desirable supplements to your writing because the drawings will help you to keep track of certain relationships while you are still in the field, as well as to recall these relationships after you have completed your fieldwork.
- The only requirement for the clarity of the sketch is that you can later understand it yourself.



# What to include in the field notes:

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- Where you observe?
- Who was there or not there?
- What events happened?



# Provide details:

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- Use descriptive adjectives.
- Use action verbs.
- Avoid making judgments about what you see.
- Be as specific as you can!



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Thank you!

