9.2 Observation

Observation has a long tradition in the social sciences: for example, it has been extensively employed by psychologists (Irwin, 1980; Brandt, 1981; Liebert, 1995) and by educational researchers (Foster, 1996b). Looking from a more sociological perspective, Adler and Adler (1994) review five 'observational paradigms' which can be distinguished in the way observational methods have been used, and give several examples of each. Their **classification** is used here to show the variety of observational approaches.

Formal ***sociology*** traces back to Simmel, who studied the forms, structures and patterns in social interaction based on his own direct observation: 'If society is conceived as interaction among individuals, the description of the forms of this interaction is the task of the science of society' (1950: 21–2). Contemporary practitioners of formal sociology often incorporate symbolic interactionist principles, and prefer to use full videotaped recordings of observations, often in such contrived situations as laboratories.

Dramaturgical sociology became popular with Goffman, who described his method as 'unsystematic naturalistic observation' in order to study how people interact, form relationships, accomplish meaning in their lives, and, especially, construct their self-presentations and carry them off in front of others. Researchers in the dramaturgical tradition have been more attentive to the observational method than Goffman, but have still relied mainly on unstructured, naturalistic recording techniques, whether working individually or in teams. The method has obvious similarities with participant observation.

Studies of the public realm extend the dramaturgical approach, and have developed into a research area in its own right. They address a wide range of issues, cover a wide range of public places, and use observational strategies which vary in researcher involvement, researcher openness, the use of teams and gender issues.

In *auto-observation*, sociologists study themselves and their companions. The use of self as a research tool goes back to the origins of sociology, and can be seen in the writings of Dilthey and Weber. Existential sociology has developed from this line of thinking. This observational approach offers great depth, yielding insights about core meanings and experiences, while raising questions about the role of the observer-researcher.

In *ethnomethodology*, the focus is on how everyday life is constructed. Since much of the interest is in processes below the surface of conscious awareness, at the taken-for-wanted level, many ethnomethodologists favour observational techniques over interview and self-report data. Observation includes listening as well as looking and everyday face-to-face interaction depends heavily on both verbal and visual behaviour. Therefore, alongside observation, contemporary ethnomethodologists have directed much of their attention to conversation analysis, since they see language as the fundamental base of communication and social order. Using audio- and videotaping, they gather data that can be analysed later, and repeatedly in minute detail, and the techniques of conversation analysis have been extended to interaction analysis (Heath and Luff, 1996). Compared with observations made from the interpretive perspective (as in participant observation), ethnomethodological observation is more structural and objective, and less mediated by the subjective perspective of the researcher.

9.2.1 Structured and unstructured approaches to observation

In naturalistic observation, observers neither manipulate nor stimulate the behaviour of those whom they are observing, in contrast to some other data gathering techniques. The situation being observed is not contrived for research purposes. This is pure or direct or non-participant observation, in contrast with participant observation, which we discuss in Section 9.3.[3]

In the literature on observation as a data collection technique, the terms 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' are frequently used. The terms 'structured' and 'unstructured' are more appropriate in this book, because observational data can be highly structured without necessarily being turned into numbers. The issue is not whether the observational data will be turned into numbers, but rather how much structure the observations will involve.

Quantitative approaches tend to be highly structured, and to require predeveloped observation schedules, usually very detailed. If this approach is chosen, decisions will be required from the researcher as to whether already existing observational schedules will be used, or whether an ohservation schedule will be specially developed. This is similar to the decision in Chapter 6 about whether to use already existing measuring instruments, or to develop them specifically for a study, and similar considerations to those given in Chapter 6 can guide the choice here.'

Qualitative approaches to observation are much more unstructured. In this case, the researcher does not use predetermined categories and classifications, but makes observations in a more natural open-ended way. Whatever the recording technique, the behaviour is observed as the stream of actions and events as they naturally unfold. The logic here is that categories and concepts for describing and analysing the observational data will emerge later in the

research, during the analysis, rather than be brought to the research, or imposed on the data, from the start.

When the observational strategy is unstructured, the process of observation typically evolves through a series of different activities. It begins with selecting a setting and gaining access to it, then starting the observing and recording. As the study progresses, the nature of the observation changes, typically sharpening in focus, leading to ever clearer research questions which require more selected observations. The observational data gathering continues until theoretical saturation is reached (Adler and Adler, 1994). Silverman (1993) suggests five stages in organizing an initially unstructured observational study: beginning the research (where a set of very general questions is proposed), writing field notes (usually beginning with broad descriptive categories, but later developing more focused codes and categories), looking as well as listening, testing hypotheses and making broader links.

Where focus and structure emerge during the fieldwork, the analogy of the funnel is useful (Spradley, 1980; Silverman, 1993):

> Ethnographic research should have a characteristic 'funnel' structure, being progressively focused over its course. Over time the research problem needs to be developed or transformed and eventually its scope is clarified and delimited and its internal structure explored. In this sense, it is frequently well into the process of inquiry that one discovers what the research is really 'about', and not uncommonly it turns out to be about something rather different from the initial foreshadowed problems. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 206)

This theme of structure which is imposed or structure which emerges is familiar. In this case, it also illustrates the specific point made in Chapter 6, about holistic and reductionist approaches to data. Structured observation, based on predetermined categories, breaks behaviour up into small parts. Unstructured observation, by contrast, can focus on the larger patterns of behaviour, more holistically and more macroscopically. There are advantages and disadvantages in both approaches. With smaller units of behaviour, you lose the larger picture, but recording and analysing are easier and more standardized. The more holistic approach keeps the larger picture in view, but the logistics of recording and, especially, of analysing the data will be more demanding. As with other issues, this does not need to be an either–or matter. Combinations of the two approaches are possible, depending on the research purposes and context.

9.2.2 Practical issues in observation

There are two main practical issues in planning the collection of observational data: approaching observation, and recording.

Approaching observation (Foster, 1996b) means establishing the focus of the observations, selecting the cases for observation and, as appropriate, selecting within cases for observation. In other words, the researcher has to decide what will be observed, and why. These are sampling decisions, and they need to be made with reference to the research questions. The issue of structure applies here too. At the highly structured end, approaching the observation in terms of focus and cases is organized ahead of data collection. In unstructured observation, focus and cases may only become clear as observations are made. Gaining access is also part of the practical business of approaching observation. In some settings, this will involve negotiation with gatekeepers, and different types of research may well require different types of negotiation and access.

The general possibilities for recording observational data range from the use of video and audiovisual equipment to the use of field notes.[5] There may be advantages to combining these different methods. The choice here is influenced by the extent to which the data are structured or unstructured – although increasingly, with today's sophisticated recording equipment, there is value in recording everything and, even if structured observation schedules are involved, using those in the analysis stage. These different recording methods each have their strengths and their limitations (Foster, 1996a; 1996b). The observational researcher's task is the usual one of analysing these in relation to the purposes and context of the research, and to choose accordingly. Earlier, we saw the connections between observation, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. The primary sources of data for ethnomethodological observation studies are audio and audiovisual recordings of naturally occurring interactions, sometimes supplemented by field observation.

Before leaving observation and moving to participant observation, a central method for data collection in ethnography, we should note the importance of observation in ethnography. 'The requirement for direct, prolonged on-the-spot observation cannot be avoided or reduced. It is the guts of the ethnographic approach. This does not always mean participant observation' (Spindler and Spindler, 1992: 63). And again: 'Above all else is the requirement that the ethnographer observe directly. No matter what instruments, coding devices, recording devices or techniques are used, the primary obligation is for the ethnographer to be there when the action takes place, and to change that action as little as possible by his or her presence' (1992: 64). Thus direct observation, as well as participant observation, is important in ethnography."

At the same time, ethnographic observation, as distinct from direct observation, has a special flavour, the flavour of ethnography itself As Wolcott puts it:

> **We are ethnographic observers when we are attending to the cultural context of the behaviour 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. (1988: 193)

Data collection techniques in ethnography need to be aligned with this viewpoint. This means that it is **not only** the behaviour, or situation, itself which is of interest in ethnography. It is also, and centrally, the meaning of that behaviour or situation as **seen** by the people **we** are studying which is the focus.