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## Chapter Five

# Being a Careful Observer

Interviews are a primary source of data in qualitative research; so too are observations. Observations can be distinguished from interviews in two ways. First, observations take place in the natural field setting instead of a location designated for the purpose of interviewing; second, observational data represent a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest rather than a secondhand account of the world obtained in an interview. In the real world of collecting data, however, informal interviews and conversations are often interwoven with observation. The terms *fieldwork* and *field study* usually connote both activities (observation and interviews) and, to a lesser degree, documentary analysis. That caveat notwithstanding, the primary focus of this chapter is on the activity of *observation*—the use of observation as a research tool, the problem of what to observe, the relationship between observer and observed, and the means for recording observations.

### Observation in Research

Being alive renders us natural observers of our everyday world and our behavior in it. What we learn helps us make sense of our world and guides our future actions. Most of this observation is routine—largely unconscious and unsystematic. It is part of living, part of our commonsense interaction with the world. But just as casually conversing with someone differs from interviewing, so too does this routine observation differ from research observation. Observation is a *research* tool when it “(1) serves a formulated research purpose,

(2) is planned deliberately, (3) is recorded systematically, and (4) is subjected to checks and controls on validity and reliability" (Kidder, 1981b, p. 264).

Critics of participant observation as a data-gathering technique point to the highly subjective and therefore unreliable nature of human perception. Human perception is also very selective. Consider a traffic accident at a busy intersection. For each different witness to the accident there will be a different, perhaps even contradictory, account of what happened. However, the witnesses were not planning to systematically observe the accident, nor were they trained in observational techniques. These factors differentiate everyday observation from research-related observation. Patton (1990) contends that comparing untrained observers with researchers is like comparing what "an amateur community talent show" can do compared with "professional performers" (p. 202). Training and mental preparation are as important for researchers "to do their best" as they are for artists (p. 201). Wolcott (1992) also notes that the difference between "mere mortals" and qualitative researchers is that "qualitative researchers, like others whose roles demand selective attentiveness—artists and novelists, detectives and spies, guards and thieves, to name a few—pay special attention to a few things to which others ordinarily give only passing attention. Observers of any ilk do no more: We all attend to certain things, and nobody attends to them all" (pp. 22–23).

Just as you can learn to be a skilled interviewer, you can also learn to be a careful, systematic observer. Training to be a skilled observer includes "learning how to write descriptively; practicing the disciplined recording of field notes; knowing how to separate detail from trivia . . . and using rigorous methods to validate observations" (Patton, 1990, p. 201). You can practice observing in any number of ways—by being a complete observer in a public place, by being a participant observer in your work or social settings, or by watching films or videotapes. You can also apprentice yourself to an experienced field researcher, comparing his or her observations with yours. You might also read other people's accounts of the experience.

An investigator might want to gather data through observation for many reasons. As an outsider an observer will notice things that have become routine to the participants themselves, things that

may lead to understanding the context. Observations are also conducted to triangulate emerging findings; that is, they are used in conjunction with interviewing and document analysis to substantiate the findings (see Chapter Nine). The participant observer sees things firsthand and uses his or her own knowledge and expertise in interpreting what is observed rather than relying upon once-removed accounts from interviews. Observation makes it possible to record behavior as it is happening.

Another reason to conduct observations is to provide some knowledge of the context or to provide specific incidents, behaviors, and so on that can be used as reference points for subsequent interviews. This is a particularly helpful strategy for understanding ill-defined phenomena. For example, in a study of respiratory therapists' critical thinking, Mishoe (1995) observed therapists as they worked in the clinical setting, and shortly thereafter she interviewed them. She was thus able to ask them what they were thinking with regard to specific behaviors she had witnessed on-site.

Finally, people may not feel free to talk about or may not want to discuss all topics. In studying a small educational unit, for example, the researcher might observe dissension and strife among certain staff members that an interview would not reveal. Observation is the best technique to use when an activity, event, or situation can be observed firsthand, when a fresh perspective is desired, or when participants are not able or willing to discuss the topic under study.

### **What to Observe**

What to observe is determined by several factors. The most important is the researcher's purpose in conducting the study in the first place. In other words, the conceptual framework, the problem, or the questions of interest determine what is to be observed. As I noted in Chapter Two, a researcher's disciplinary orientation often determines how a problem is defined. An educator might observe a school because of an interest in how students learn, whereas a sociologist might visit the same school because of an interest in social institutions. Practical considerations also play a part in determining what to observe. Certain behavior is difficult to observe; a researcher must have the time, money, and energy to devote to observation and must be *allowed* to observe by those in the situation of interest.

Hawkins (1982) notes, "Impressions also influence the choice of what to observe. Researchers often begin a series of investigations by impressionistic, informal observation" (p. 22). These early impressions help determine subsequent patterns of observation. LeCompte and Preissle (1993) write that what to observe depends on the topic, the conceptual framework, "the data that begin to emerge as the participant observer interacts in the daily flow of events and activities, and the intuitive reactions and hunches that participant observers experience as all these factors come together" (p. 200).

What to observe is partly a function of how structured the observer wants to be. Just as there is a range of structure in interviewing, there is also a range of structure in observation. The researcher can decide ahead of time to concentrate on observing certain events, behaviors, or persons. A code sheet might be used to record instances of specified behavior. Less structured observations can be compared to a television camera scanning the area. Where to begin looking depends on the research question, but where to focus or stop action cannot be determined ahead of time. The focus must be allowed to emerge and in fact may change over the course of the study.

Nevertheless, no one can observe everything, and the researcher must start somewhere. Several writers (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984; Borg and Gall, 1989; Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Patton, 1990; Taylor and Bogdan, 1984) present lists of things to observe, at least to get started in the activity. Here is a checklist of elements likely to be present in any setting:

1. *The physical setting:* What is the physical environment like? What is the context? What kinds of behavior is the setting designed for? How is space allocated? What objects, resources, technologies are in the setting? The principal's office, the school bus, the cafeteria, and the classroom vary in physical attributes as well as in anticipated behavior.
2. *The participants:* Describe who is in the scene, how many people, and their roles. What brings these people together? Who is allowed here? Who is not here who would be expected to be here? What are the relevant characteristics of the participants?
3. *Activities and interactions:* What is going on? Is there a definable sequence of activities? How do the people interact with the

activity and with one another? How are people and activities “connected or interrelated—either from the participants’ point of view or from the researcher’s perspective” (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984, p. 113)? What norms or rules structure the activities and interactions? When did the activity begin? How long does it last? Is it a typical activity, or unusual?

4. *Conversation*: What is the content of conversations in this setting? Who speaks to whom? Who listens? Quote directly, paraphrase and summarize conversations. If possible, use a tape recorder to back up your notetaking. Note silences and nonverbal behavior that add meaning to the exchange.
5. *Subtle factors*: Less obvious but perhaps as important to the observation are
  - Informal and unplanned activities
  - Symbolic and connotative meanings of words
  - Nonverbal communication such as dress and physical space
  - Unobtrusive measures such as physical clues
  - “What does *not* happen”—especially if it ought to have happened (Patton, 1990, p. 235, emphasis in original).
6. *Your own behavior*: You are as much a part of the scene as participants. How is your role, whether as an observer or an intimate participant, affecting the scene you are observing? What do you say and do? In addition, what thoughts are you having about what is going on? These become “observer comments,” an important part of field notes.

Each participant observation experience has its own rhythm and flow. The duration of a single observation or the total amount of time spent collecting data in this way is a function of the problem being investigated. There is no ideal amount of time to spend observing, nor is there one preferred pattern of observation. For some situations, observation over an extended period of time may be most appropriate; for others, shorter periodic observations make the most sense given the purpose of the study and practical constraints.

The process of collecting data through observations can be broken into the three stages: entry, data collection, and exit. Gaining entry into a site begins with gaining the confidence and permission of those who can approve the activity. This step is more

easily accomplished through a mutual contact who can recommend the researcher to the “gatekeepers” involved. Even with an advocate working on your behalf, it may be difficult to gain entry to certain settings. In my experience, business and industry, some government agencies, and some groups because of the sensitivity or exclusivity of their mission (such as self-help groups, racial and ethnic groups, and so forth) are difficult to gain entry to as an outsider. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) point out that most groups will want answers to the following:

- What are you actually going to do?
- Will you be disruptive?
- What are you going to do with your findings?
- Why us?
- What will we get out of this? [p. 84–85]

Being prepared to answer these questions as candidly as possible, being persistent, and being able to adjust to modifications in your original request will increase your chances of gaining entry. Once entry has been gained, Taylor and Bogdan (1984) have some comments for the first few days in the field:

- Observers should be relatively passive and unobtrusive, put people at ease, learn how to act and dress in the setting.
- Collecting data is secondary to becoming familiar with the setting.
- Keep the first observations fairly short to avoid becoming overwhelmed with the novelty of the situation.
- Be honest but not overly technical or detailed in explaining what you are doing.

They also suggest that the researcher establish rapport by fitting into the participants’ routines, finding some common ground with them, helping out on occasion, being friendly, and showing interest in the activity.

Once you (the researcher) become familiar with the setting and begin to see what is there to observe, serious data collection can begin. There is little glamour and much hard work in this phase of research. It takes great concentration to observe intently,

remember as much as possible, and then record in as much detail as possible what has been observed. Conducting an observation, even a short one, can be exhausting, especially in the beginning of a study. Everyone and everything is new; you do not know what will be important, so you try to observe everything; you are concerned about the effect you will have on the scene; you miss things while taking notes, and so on. It is probably best to do more frequent, shorter observations at first. The more familiar everything feels, the more comfortable you are in the setting, the longer you will be able to observe.

The overall time spent on the site, the number of visits, and the number of observations made per visit cannot be precisely determined ahead of time. At some point, time and money will run out, and new information will be scarce. Ideally, depletion of resources coincides with saturation of information. Leaving the field, however, may be even more difficult than gaining entry. It may mean “breaking attachments and sometimes even offending those one has studied, leaving them feeling betrayed and used” (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984, p. 67). Taylor and Bogdan recommend easing out or drifting off—that is, “gradually cutting down on the frequency of visits and letting people know that the research is coming to an end” (p. 68).

### **Relationship Between Observer and Observed**

The researcher can assume one of several stances while collecting information as an observer; stances range from being a full participant—the investigator is a member of the group being observed—to being a spectator. Gold’s (1958) classic typology offers a spectrum of four possible stances:

1. *Complete participant*: The researcher is a member of the group being studied and conceals his or her observer role from the group so as not to disrupt the natural activity of the group. The inside information obtainable by using this method must be weighed against the possible disadvantages—loss of perspective on the group, being labeled a spy or traitor when research activities are revealed, and the questionable ethics of deceiving the other participants.

2. *Participant as observer*: The researcher's observer activities, which are known to the group, are subordinate to the researcher's role as a participant. The trade-off here is between the depth of the information revealed to the researcher and the level of confidentiality promised to the group in order to obtain this information. Adler and Adler (1994, p. 380) call this an "active membership role" in which researchers are "involved in the setting's central activities, assuming responsibilities that advance the group, but without fully committing themselves to members' values and goals."

3. *Observer as participant*: The researcher's observer activities are known to the group; participation in the group is definitely secondary to the role of information gatherer. Using this method, the researcher may have access to many people and a wide range of information, but the level of the information revealed is controlled by the group members being investigated. Adler and Adler (1994, p. 380) differentiate this "peripheral membership role" from the active membership role just described. Here researchers "observe and interact closely enough with members to establish an insider's identity without participating in those activities constituting the core of group membership."

4. *Complete observer*: The researcher is either hidden from the group (for example, behind a one-way mirror) or in a completely public setting such as an airport or library.

More recent research has defined yet another possible stance of the researcher vis-à-vis participants—that of the *collaborative partner*. This role is closest to being a complete participant on the above continuum, but the investigator's identity is clearly known to everyone involved. Although defined variously within the areas of teacher research, feminist research, or action and participatory research, the defining characteristic of this stance is that the investigator and the participants are equal partners in the research process—including defining the problem to be studied, collecting and analyzing data, and writing and disseminating the findings. (For further discussion of this role see Olesen, 1994; Reinharz, 1992; Merriam and Simpson, 1995; McTaggart, 1991; Munro, 1993.)

Inherent in this continuum is the extent to which the investigation is overt or covert. Whether the researcher is a complete participant or a complete observer, the "real" activity is not known to



those being observed. This situation leads to ethical questions related to the privacy and protection of research subjects—issues discussed more fully in Chapter Nine.

In reality, researchers are rarely total participants or total observers. Rather, they are what Gans (1982) calls a *researcher participant*—one “who participates in a social situation but is personally only partially involved, so that he can function as a researcher” (p. 54). Although the ideal in qualitative research is to get inside the perspective of the participants, full participation is not always possible. A researcher can never know exactly how it feels to be illiterate or mentally ill, for example. A question can also be raised as to just how much better it is to be an insider. Being born into a group, “going native,” or just being a member does not necessarily afford the perspective necessary for studying the phenomenon. Jarvie (1982) notes that “there is nothing especially privileged about the observation of a parade made by those in it. Spectators are in a better position; television viewers in a still better one” (p. 68). However, Swisher (1986) was able to get reliable information about multicultural education from parents and teachers in a reservation community because she herself is a member of the community. Patton (1990) underscores the balance needed between insider and outsider in qualitative research. “Experiencing the program as an insider is what necessitates the participant part of participant observation. At the same time, however, there is clearly an observer side to this process. The challenge is to combine participation and observation so as to become capable of understanding the program as an insider while describing the program for outsiders” (p. 207).

As the researcher gains familiarity with the phenomenon being studied, the mix of participation and observation is likely to change. The researcher might begin as a spectator and gradually become involved in the activities being observed. In other situations an investigator might decide to join a group to see what it is actually like to be a participant and then gradually withdraw, eventually assuming the role of interested observer. For example, in recounting her field experiences in a home for the aged, Posner (1980) traces her movement from participant observer as a volunteer worker, to complete participant as a program director, to observer with minimum participation.

Participant observation is a schizophrenic activity in that the researcher usually participates but not to the extent of becoming totally absorbed in the activity. While participating, the researcher tries to stay sufficiently detached to observe and analyze. It is a marginal position and personally difficult to sustain. Gans (1982) captures the distress in being a researcher participant. "The temptation to become involved was ever-present. I had to fight the urge to shed the emotional handcuffs that bind the researcher, and to react spontaneously to the situation, to relate to people as a person and to derive pleasure rather than data from the situation. Often, I carried on an internal tug of war, to decide how much spontaneous participation was possible without missing something as a researcher" (p. 54).

The ambiguity of participant observation is one source of anxiety for the qualitative researcher. Gans cites three other sources that make this method of gathering data particularly difficult. There is, he writes, "the constant worry about the flow of research activities." And he goes on to ask, "Is one doing the right thing at the right time, attending the right meeting, or talking to the right people" (p. 58)? Another source of anxiety is "how to make sense out of what one is studying, how not to be upset by the initial inability to understand and how to order the constant influx of data" (p. 59). Finally, the inherent deception in participant observation leads to "a pervasive feeling of guilt" and "a tendency to overidentify with the people being studied" (p. 59).

Another concern is the extent to which the observer investigator affects what is being observed. In traditional models of research, the ideal is to be as objective and detached as possible so as not to "contaminate" the study. However, in qualitative research where the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection, subjectivity and interaction are assumed. The interdependency between the observer and the observed may bring about changes in both parties' behaviors. The question, then, is not whether the process of observing affects what is observed but how the researcher can identify those effects and account for them in interpreting the data. At the very least, participants who know they are being observed will tend to behave in socially acceptable ways and present themselves in a favorable manner. Further, participants will regulate their behavior in reaction to even subtle forms of feedback from the

observer—as when notes are taken or behavior is attended to in a particular fashion. Finally, the mere presence of the observer in the setting can affect the climate of the setting, often effecting a more formal atmosphere than is usually the case.

The extent to which an observer changes the situation studied is not at all clear. Frankenberg (1982, p. 51) points out that in traditional anthropological studies the activities of an ethnographer (researcher) are not likely to change “custom and practice built up over years.” It is more likely that the researcher will prove to be “a catalyst for changes that are already taking place.” Others have suggested that the stability of a social setting is rarely disrupted by the presence of an observer (Reinharz, 1979). In any case, the researcher must be sensitive to the effects one might be having on the situation and account for those effects.

### **Recording Observations**

What is written down or mechanically recorded from a period of observation becomes the raw data from which a study's findings eventually emerge. This written account of the observation constitutes *field notes*, which are analogous to the interview transcript. In both forms of data collection, the more complete the recording, the easier it is to analyze the data. How much can be recorded during an observation? The answer depends on the researcher's role and the extent to which he or she is a participant in the activity. On-site recording can thus range from continuous (especially for a total observer), to taking sketchy notes, to not recording anything at all during an observation. Although mechanical devices such as videotapes, film, or tape recorders can be used to record observations, the cost and obtrusiveness of these methods often preclude their use. It is much more likely that a researcher will jot down notes during an observation and wait until afterward to record in detail what has been observed. Thus, unlike an interviewer who can usually fall back on a tape recording of the session, a participant observer has to rely on memory to recount the session.

Even if the researcher has been able to take notes during an observation, it is imperative that full notes be written, typed, or dictated as soon after the observation as possible. It takes great self-discipline to sit down and describe something just observed. The

observation itself is only half the work. "For the actual writing of notes may take as long or longer than did the observation! Indeed, a reasonable rule of thumb here is to expect and plan to spend as much time writing notes as one spent observing. . . . All the fun of actually being out and about monkeying around in some setting must also be met by cloistered rigor in committing to paper—and therefore to future usefulness—what has taken place" (Lofland, 1971, pp. 103–104).

Every researcher devises techniques for remembering and recording the specifics of an observation. It can be an intimidating part of qualitative research, however, and I advise beginning with short periods of observation; then practice recalling and recording data. Taylor and Bogdan (1984) offer some suggestions for recalling data. Later recall will be helped if *during* an observation investigators

- Pay attention.
- Shift from a "wide angle" to a "narrow angle" lens—that is, focusing "on a specific person, interaction, or activity, while mentally blocking out all the others" (p. 54).
- Look for key words in people's remarks that will stand out later.
- Concentrate on the first and last remarks in each conversation.
- Mentally play back remarks and scenes during breaks in the talking or observing.

Once the observation is completed, they suggest the following: leave the setting after observing as much as can be remembered; record field notes as soon as possible after observing; in case of a time lag between observing and recording, summarize or outline the observation; draw a diagram of the setting and trace movements through it; and incorporate pieces of data remembered at later times into the original field notes (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). Bogdan (1972) also advises against talking to anyone about the observation before notes have been recorded. Finally, he suggests being more concerned with remembering the substance of a conversation than with producing a "flawless verbatim reproduction" (p. 42).

Field notes based on observation need to be in a format that will allow the researcher to find desired information easily. Formats

vary, but a set of notes usually begins with the time, place, and purpose of the observation. It is also helpful to list the participants present or at least to indicate how many and what kinds of people are present—described in ways meaningful to the research. If the researcher is observing a school board meeting about a recent racial incident, for example, she or he could note the number of people present, whether they are parents, teachers, board members, or interested community residents, and the racial makeup of the group. A diagram of the setting's physical aspects might be included. Other hints for setting up field notes are to leave a wide margin on one side of the page or the other for later notes; double-space between segments of activity for ease of reading and data analysis; and use quotation marks when someone is directly quoted.

An important component of field notes is observer commentary; comments can include the researcher's feelings, reactions, hunches, initial interpretations, and working hypotheses. These comments are over and above factual descriptions of what is going on; they are comments on and thoughts about the setting, people, and activities. In raising questions about what is observed or speculating as to what it all means, the researcher is actually engaging in some preliminary data analysis. The joint collection and analysis of data is essential in qualitative research.

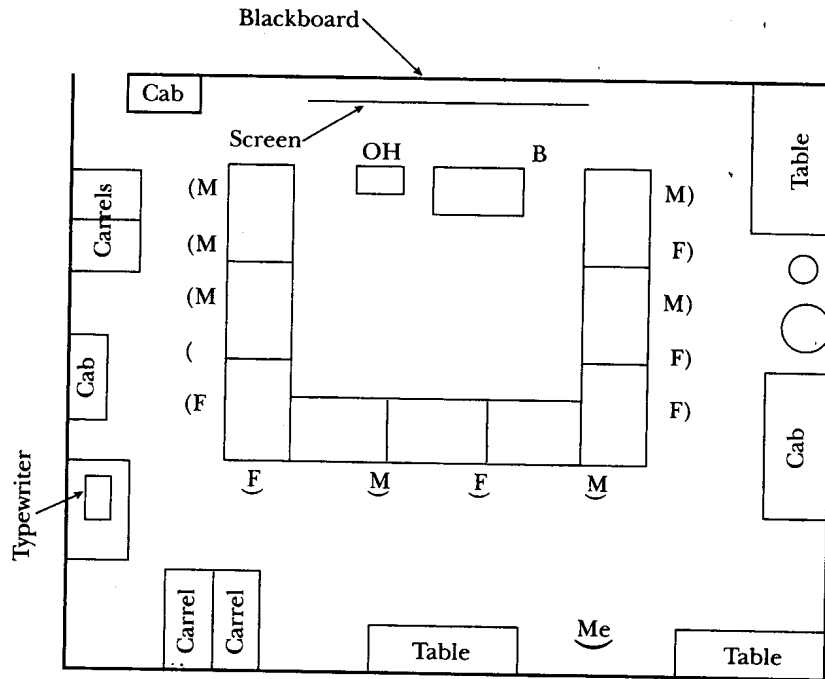
The content of field notes usually includes the following:

- Verbal descriptions of the setting, the people, the activities
- Direct quotations or at least the substance of what people said
- Observer's comments—put in the margins or in the running narrative and identified by underlining, bracketing, and the initials "OC"

Exhibit 5.1 presents an excerpt from field notes written after the researcher had observed a class session. The investigator was particularly interested in instruction and in the interaction between teacher and students. The topic for this session was the development and use of overhead transparencies. Note the diagram of the layout of the classroom, including where the observer is sitting ("Me" in the lower right); the observer's comments are interwoven throughout the recording. These are in italics and labeled "OC" to set them off from the observations.

**Exhibit 5.1. Sample of Field Notes (Excerpts).**

I got to the classroom about 10 minutes early so that I could observe how the classroom was laid out. I took a seat in the back and sketched a diagram of the class. There were still 5 minutes to go and no one had showed up yet, so I went out into the hall to wait for B. After a minute or so, B came along. I saw that B didn't have any materials and when I asked about it, B indicated that all the things needed were already in the classroom. We went in together. Only one student had arrived, but there were still a few minutes to go.



Another student arrived and started to chat about the first student's teaching activity that had taken place the day before. As they talked a few more students arrived, one of whom joined in the conversation. A few more students arrived. B was in the front of the classroom waiting to start the class. The conversation got onto the topic of lesson plans and the male in front of me asked what a lesson plan was. B asked him if he had gotten the handout on the topic, and after looking

**Exhibit 5.1. (continued).**

through his books, he said that he hadn't. B would get him a copy during the break. After noting that the class was small today, B asked if they had all picked a topic for the sample lesson that they would have to prepare materials for. Some indicated that they hadn't, and B asked them, "What are you interested in?" B told them that they would talk about it during lab time. Another student arrived. B asked the class again if anyone else had picked a topic. A student replied that she would teach multiplication.

B said that the class was going to start. The students quieted down and looked at her as she announced that the subject of today's lesson was going to be how to make overhead transparencies. B asked, "Has anyone ever made an overhead transparency?" A few students indicated that they had, but when they were questioned further on the topic, it turned out that one student had used them but had never made them, and the other had written on some acetate that she then used as an overhead.

B then told the class that this was B's favorite topic because this was a really good, low-cost method that teachers could use to convey complex information to a class. A little effort could go a long way, and they weren't expensive to make. There are a few ways to make them and there are lots of ways to use them. The students who were in marketing were told that transparencies were used a lot in business to support presentations.

B told the class that transparencies were very good in helping to get a message across. They were reminded that this is how their projects would be graded, in how well the overhead helped to convey a message that supported an objective, in what domain of knowledge they would be used, and what the message was.

*OC—Up until this time, no one had asked any questions. The students were quiet; they didn't move in their chairs very much. While this was going on, the last of the students who would be attending the session arrived.*

The class was asked what a domain was. A student replied, "Cognitive, affective, psychomotor." "Very good," B replied.

"What is a message?" B asked. No reply this time.

B turned on the overhead projector and proceeded to show some examples. The first one was a colorful slide of the planets.

*OC—B must like planets. There is a model of the solar system, in similar colors, in B's office.*

B pointed out that this particular slide would be useful in having students identify the planets and that the slide would not be very helpful in explaining planetary motion. The students were also shown an example of masking. (The names of the planets were masked by pieces of cardboard so that they could be revealed by the teacher, as required.)

*OC—The students were attentive, but quiet, too quiet I thought. What's happening here is that the teacher is not asking enough questions. For example, B could have asked the students what the flaps were for, and why would you want to do such a thing. Instead of telling what the slide was good for, asking what it would be good for. Nice locus of control issue.*

The second transparency's subject was the water cycle, a slide consisting of the main and two overlays. B explained how an overhead of this kind could be used to describe a process.

*OC—The students were quiet, no questions.*

The next transparency was used to describe a concept, in this case formal and informal balance. B explained that a slide should not be overly cluttered, which brought up the next example, a slide that had too much information on it. B next put up a slide that showed a computer, some modems, and a telephone and asked what the students thought of it. A few students replied that they did not understand it, whereupon B explained that it was a slide showing the electronic bulletin board for the college.

*OC—It was probably B's intent to show the class a professional-looking slide, which it was. The content of the slide was, however, out of the experience of the students. This problem might have been gotten around by first explaining the content, and then asking the students what else they might have noticed about the slide, in order to bring up the subject of its professional look.*

B asked the class to turn to page 23 of the workbook in order to see what the assignment for overhead transparencies will be. Each student was to make three transparencies relating to a lesson that had been devised by the student. They were to make one with the direct dye medium (the one with the notch), the second with the transfer sheet medium, and the third to be hand-drawn. The slides set would also have to demonstrate the techniques of masking, overlay, and color.

A student asked, "What's masking?" B then explained the concept of slow or controlled revelation. It was explained to the class that this technique is used when you don't wish to show the whole slide at once.

*OC—It would have been nice to explain the relationship between masking and overlays.*

B passed around a handout that described several techniques for building overheads with masking. B then asked the class if they would like a demonstration of how to make a slide using overlays. B had removed the overhead showing the requirements for the project.

A student asked, "What comes after masking?" B replied, "The use of color."



**Exhibit 5.1. (continued).**

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B then started to show the class the technique for making a slide with two overlays. The slide that showed the water cycle was the subject. The main transparency was made and attached to the frame on all four sides with masking tape. The overlays were then made and attached to the frame on one side only. In B's example, the main was in red and the overlays in blue. B then went on to demonstrate how pieces of different-colored acetate may be used to add color to the slides. B indicated that these materials may be purchased in stores.

*OC—No one asks where.*

A student asked if the overlays need to be the same color. B replied that they can be anything the student wants.

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*Source:* Brandt (1987). Reprinted with permission.

Ethnographers often maintain something called a *fieldwork journal*—an introspective record of the anthropologist's experience in the field. It includes his or her ideas, fears, mistakes, confusion, and reactions to the experience and can include thoughts about the research methodology itself. In addition to field notes and the fieldwork journal, ethnographers often write memos or "think papers" containing analysis and interpretation (Spradley, 1979). Qualitative researchers are more likely to use the integrated format described earlier, although some do keep a separate journal of the experience. That becomes a data source, and the researcher sometimes uses it when writing about the methodology. In a case study of a junior college that had received federal development funds, Malcolm (Malcolm and Welch, 1981) uses his own observer comments to describe his experiences with the methodology. On his first day on the site, he writes, "in anguish," on the back of a page of notes. "The memory load is tremendous! Recalling people and names, building layout and function, dialogue and argument. I had been afraid of my inability to observe and listen, but that problem, at least on this first day, pales in the face of memory load" (p. 75). Later, in a personal reaction to the methodology, he writes, "Despite intensive preparation for the study, I was surprised by a number of my reactions to the methodology. One was my conviction about the accuracy and validity of the results. . . . Other unexpected reactions related to the tremendous memory load and the

constant demand to record the manifold aspects of each observation session, interview, and experience" (Malcolm and Welch, 1981, pp. 67–68).

### **Summary**

Observation is a major means of collecting data in qualitative research. It offers a firsthand account of the situation under study and, when combined with interviewing and document analysis, allows for a holistic interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated. It is the technique of choice when behavior can be observed firsthand or when people cannot or will not discuss the research topic.

Fieldwork, as participant observation is often called, involves going to the site, program, institution, setting—the field—to observe the phenomenon under study. Unless it is public behavior the researcher wants to observe, entry must first be gained from those in authority. While on-site, the researcher is absorbed by what to observe, what to remember, what to record. This chapter presents some guidelines for these activities, such as what to observe, but ultimately the success of participant observation rests on the talent and skill of the investigator.

There are several stances an investigator can assume when conducting observations, from being a member of the group and a complete participant—an insider—to being a complete observer, unknown to those being observed; each stance has advantages and drawbacks. Regardless of the stance, an observer cannot help but affect and be affected by the setting, and this interaction may lead to a distortion of the situation as it exists under nonresearch conditions. The schizophrenic aspect of being at once participant and observer is a by-product of this method of data collection and is a problem not easily dealt with.

Finally, the observation is only half the process. Observations must be recorded in as much detail as possible to form the database for analysis. Field notes can come in many forms, but at the least they include descriptions, direct quotations, and observer comments.