Fieldwork & Access for Qualitative Researchers

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TODAY

1. Discuss common issues when conducting qualitative fieldwork
2. Strategies for access to research sites
3. Maximizing time in the field & organization strategies
4. Q&A
5. ORS Resources
How many of you have ever thought?

• How much time should I spend “in the field”?

• How will I gain access to my research site?

• What about IRB?

• How do you answer these questions...?
What is “fieldwork”?  

• How do you all define this term?  
• Sometimes also referred to as participant observation  
  • “a method through which researchers generate understanding and knowledge by watching, interacting, asking questions, collecting documents, making audio or video recordings, and reflecting after the fact” (Tracy, 2013)  
• The ‘field” is metaphorical  
  • A setting or reference to a population
Negotiating Access

• Be comfortable with not being in charge
• Get to know gatekeepers
  • Formal access proposal/request
• Know the scene before you enter it
  • Consider scenes you are already a member of
• Are you “fitting in”?
  • Dress/clothing/appearance?
• Are you being authentic?

• Can you offer participants anything for their cooperation?
  • Vs. your access only benefitting you & your research
• There’s no right way; varies from each context & researcher
  • Typically requires a lot of legwork
  • Time consuming
  • Keep a contact log
## Contact Log

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name &amp; Role</th>
<th>Contact Info.</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Follow-up?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashleigh Day, Assistant Professor UT Tyler</td>
<td><a href="mailto:aday@uttyler.edu">aday@uttyler.edu</a></td>
<td>Email sent on 2/2/22 at 2:00pm. Requesting access to site.</td>
<td>Send follow-up on 2/16/22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Accept rejection (it’ll happen)
- Consider asking those who send rejections for another outlet/person to contact
- Must consider de-identified data that’s stored & IRB (i.e., pseudonyms)
Access Proposal

IRB language

Consider requesting a ‘letter of support’ for IRB

Possible outline for the emailed proposal:

I. Study rationale
II. Proposal—what you are requesting, for how long, your goals, etc.
III. Your experience and credentials
IV. Confidentiality, organizational protection, IRB info.
Access for Various Sites

- Consider how you would request access for:
  - Observing how dog owners interact at the public dog park
  - Observing university employees communicate with coworkers throughout the day
  - Observing end-of-life communication between hospice workers and patients
  - Observing a private Facebook group for new moms of multiples (e.g., twins, triplets)
Fieldwork in Virtual Settings

- Access must be negotiated for many virtual sites
  - Closed groups, password-protected sites, etc. are NOT public settings
  - Permission is required
- As a researcher, it’s usually inadvisable to be a nondisclosed “lurker”
  - Unethical
Informed Consent

- May be waived—check with IRB always
- For non-public settings consider:
  - Briefing overviews in groups
  - Flyers/email
  - One-on-one chats
- Can feel odd to do, but is needed
- There’s a finesse to it
  - “I was hoping to shadow you today…”
    [hands person Informed Consent sheet to start that conversation]
Collection in the Field

- Participant observation
  - Complete participant
  - Participant as observer/active participant
  - Focused participant observer
  - Complete observer

- Must always weight how phenomenon is impacted from the type of observation
  - Unobtrusive vs. obtrusive observation

- Fieldnotes
  - Must consider how you’ll record these in the field
  - At first, limit interpretation; Be descriptive

- Informal, unstructured interviews
- (more) Formal, structure interviews
- Artifacts, documents
Timing – How Long?

- Account for negotiating access in your research timeline
  - Then, account for the time of actually doing fieldwork
- I aim for theoretical saturation
  - “no new information emerging”
- Also depends on how long you can spend in the field per visit
  - Method(ology), too
  - EX: most ethnographies aim for 6 months+
- **What context-specific factors might impact ‘time in the field’ for your research?**
  - Business hours
  - Rare phenomenon (e.g., observing search committee interviews)
  - Physical and/or emotional fatigue
Fieldwork Resources

- “Field Observation & Notes Practice” worksheet:
  https://www.uttyler.edu/research/files/ors_files/aday_field_observation_notes_12092021.pdf

- “Fieldnotes and Participant Observation” worksheet:
  https://www.uttyler.edu/research/ors-research-design-data-analysis-lab/resources/qualitative/
Resources

• Research Design & Data Analysis Lab: https://www.uttyler.edu/research/ors-research-design-data-analysis-lab/

• Schedule a consultant appointment with me for qualitative questions: https://www.uttyler.edu/research/ors-research-design-data-analysis-lab/ors-research-design-data-analysis-lab-consultants/

• Other Consultants: Quantitative, academic writing, surveys, etc.

• Future webinars/workshops

• (My worksheets for qualitative researchers)
Please take the post-webinar survey 😊

Sent via email
Other Questions?

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References