

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
A PERSONAL SKILLS APPROACH

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OBSERVING

EXERCISE ONE—THE QUIET PLACE

There are certain enduring traditions that seem to be a part of many cultures. For instance, when some seekers have needed to think in peace, to sort out what is central and what is peripheral in their lives, they have turned to the "desert." Native American youths of the Southwest headed into the desert on vision quests, in search of true identity. Eastern Rite monks of the early Christian Era turned away from cities and from the merging of religion and culture to lead solitary and ascetic lives in the deserts of the Middle East. Australian native people set off on "walkabouts" in the Outback to discover themselves and their place in the world. There is something about the emptiness of the desert that allows the seeker to discover substance in apparent emptiness.

Our first exercise is designed to tap into the enormous power that resides in the "desert." However, this exercise is not meant to be either spiritually or philosophically profound. We are seekers of a different sort, and we need to take advantage of emptiness for different reasons.

Hopefully, this exercise will allow you to discover some of your own basic observational preferences and orientations. To do any form of qualitative research, you need to find your own observational strengths and to hone your own basic observational skills. You need to do this first under simplified conditions.

Therefore, you need to find a "desert." It need not be a real desert. It can be a metaphorical desert; that is, any place that is relatively empty. Perhaps it is a spot on campus that is off the beaten trail. Perhaps it is a restaurant on a slow day. Feel free to use your imagination to find a simple and bare place where you can settle in and observe, without being overwhelmed or being observed yourself.

The procedures for doing this first exercise are quite simple:

- Find a place that is very quiet and isolated. The less human activity associated with this place, the better. Even a very isolated and empty place is much busier and harder to observe than you might suppose.
- Take paper and pencil with you to this place. Record the date and time that you begin your observations. For this particular exercise, it is better to use paper and pencil than a tape recorder. Tape recorders allow us to babble unless we are very skilled at dictation. It

is also better to use paper and pencil than, say, a notebook computer. Computers have a nasty tendency to run out of battery power, or to manifest other glitches. Also, for many of us, it takes more attention to type on a keyboard than to jot down notes on a pad. With a paper and pencil, you can spend more time with your eyes on the site, and not on your computer screen.

- Begin observing and recording your observations. Observe for at least 30 minutes, but for no more than 60 minutes. When you are done, record the finishing time.
- For now, don't worry about whether or not you are observing properly. There is no magic to observation—it is something we have done all our lives. Good research observational skills are built through practice. Be alert and reflective about what you perceive, about what these things mean to you, and also try to develop a sense of what you are not observing.
- To finish this exercise, pull your observational findings into an observational report. Again, do not worry about proper format at this time. Simply decide what to include and what to exclude, and make a report. You may wish to share your report with fellow students or with your instructor.

The goal of this exercise is to help you discover what sort of observer you are under natural and ordinary conditions. Do not worry about trying to follow some preconceived observational protocol. These protocols will only interfere with your own inherent observational tendencies. Instead, focus on more general issues. What do you consider important? How do you proceed with this sort of task? What are some of your basic strategies? Your basic tactics? Do not worry about these matters until after you have done your observational exercise. Just relax and do what seems most natural to you.

REFLECTING ON OBSERVING

Observation is both the most basic and the single trickiest skill for qualitative researchers to master. That is why we start with it.

As human beings, we are programmed to observe. We cannot ignore our surroundings or the activities that go on in those surroundings, unless we actually make a sustained effort to ignore these things. Even in the midst of shutting off our normal observational processes, a truly unusual or unexplained event will snap us back to full awareness and back into the regular observational process, whether we want to do it or not. We can no more stop observing than we can stop breathing. Sure, we can hold our breath and we can hold our observations, but sooner or later we are forced to both breathe and observe.

WHY IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH OBSERVATION SO DIFFICULT?

Given the constant presence and prevalent role of observation in our ordinary lives, why should it be a tricky skill for a qualitative researcher to acquire? Very simply, it is

⇒ hard to turn away from our ordinary uses of observation per se, and move toward a research orientation. There are at least three primary reasons for this basic difficulty.

1 First of all, most of our observational efforts are geared toward what we might call "maintenance." This can be a subtle point to grasp. Think of it this way—suppose you are driving down a familiar street. Perhaps you are listening to the radio and daydreaming about an upcoming vacation. What are you actually observing under these circumstances? More often than not, you are checking out the familiar terrain just to make sure there are no serious changes or surprises lurking there. That way, you do not have to invest a lot of time or attention to the observational process. While this helps us lead our everyday lives, it works against us as qualitative researchers.

We can step outside this ordinary casual "maintenance" process to some degree when we observe as researchers, but we usually sustain more of this ordinary "maintenance" functioning than we might realize. It is as if we have to work against our instincts in order not to see the ordinary and the everyday. That is, we see what we expect to see. Something out of the ordinary has to happen, or we have to pay very careful attention, to do otherwise.

2 The second source of difficulty is the fact that genuine qualitative research observation is intense and is usually very taxing. This is because such acts of observation have to both take note of, and then go beyond, the ordinary and everyday. You are spending more energy than usual, and this is both more demanding and more tiring.

To emphasize this last point, let us go back to our driving example. Suppose you run into a sudden traffic problem. It turns out that, say, a raspberry jam truck has overturned up ahead. Fortunately, no one has been injured, but the road is a real mess. Smashed jars of raspberry jam are strewn all over the place. You might say that this is a real traffic jam!

Under these circumstances, you are observing the road in a careful and intense way. You have put aside your ordinary "maintenance" observation. Your concentration is totally given over to looking out for glass shards and slippery patches of jam. You are also watching your fellow drivers, to see what they are doing.

When you finally navigate through this sudden and treacherous obstacle course, you are surprised to find that the radio is in the middle of playing one of your favorite songs. Normally, as soon as that particular song would come on, you would start to sing along with your usual gusto. On this occasion, you didn't start singing since you literally did not hear the song. You were so busy observing the road that you shut off your awareness of everything else. You also notice that you have been perspiring, your eyes are achy and tired, and you feel somewhat fatigued.

Now, imagine a situation where you have to make sure that you are paying attention, not only to the road and to the other drivers, but where you also have to note the presence of your favorite song as it comes on the radio! In other words, you have to be able to observe the extraordinary and the ordinary at the same time without one type of observation getting in the way of the other. A perfect qualitative observer could do this, but this level of observational skill tends to be beyond us mere

←

mortals. However, we continue to work on our abilities to observe in more than one direction at a time.

3 There is a third complicating factor that we have already addressed implicitly in our traffic example; ordinary observation tends to adopt what we might call a "convergent observational focus." We saw this point illustrated quite nicely in the previous example. When a crisis arose, you focused entirely on the road and lost track of the song that was playing on the radio. You also failed to notice, say, that a familiar billboard had changed its message, and that a car that had been following you had turned off before you got to the end of the jam mess. "Convergent observational focus," in these sorts of settings, is nothing less than a tool we use instinctively to increase our chances of survival. No wonder it is so prevalent in all of our observational activities.

In everyday life, "convergent observational focus" can be quite powerful, but qualitative research observation requires us to be divergent as well. We have to be able to turn our eyes and ears away from a central focus, and pay attention to what is happening on the edges and at the limits of the observational setting. This is perhaps the single most difficult skill for the qualitative research observer to learn, but the one that potentially can yield the most benefits.

Given these difficulties and complications and circumstances, what can you do to improve your observational skills? The most important first step is to understand yourself as an observer. We can begin this process of understanding by looking at different observer types.

OBSERVER TYPES

As a result of your observational exercise, you now have a more explicit sense of the sort of observer that you are. Did you pay a great deal of attention to sounds? Sights? Human interactions? One way to understand widely differing approaches to observation is to categorize observers themselves by creating idealized observer types.

The following sections lay out a series of such idealized observer types. There is nothing particularly scientific or theoretical about this list. It is actually a list that I have compiled and modified over the years by looking at observation reports done by my students as they performed an observational exercise similar to the one that led off this chapter. These idealized observer types are presented as a guide to help you identify your own observational preferences and tendencies.

This list does not pretend to be exhaustive or exclusive. In other words, this list is far from being definitive. If you feel that you, or others, fit into some undefined type, feel free to create a new category.

Also remember that each category is an extreme type. No one real person is an example of a "pure" category. All of us embrace aspects of at least several of these

categories. We can usually turn to one of these types, though, and say that it reflects our basic orientation toward observation.

Having stated our disclaimers, let us examine eight of the most common types of observers that I have been able to document.

A

The Embracer

The Embracer seeks to take in as much as is humanly possible. No detail is too unimportant, no incident too trivial. The Embracer does not seek to sample, but to capture the whole. In this fashion, the Embracer is dedicated to bringing a richness to the act of observation that respects the richness and complexity of life itself.

The positive side to the Embracer stance is that it can be used to create an observational experience and subsequent report that is dazzling in its richness and texture. A skilled Embracer experiences and documents so much so effectively that you do not just consume the observational account—you nearly re-experience it.

The negative side lies in the term “nearly re-experience.” The Embracer, regardless of effort and skill, always falls short of being able to re-create or totally document a complete experience, no matter how apparently empty or sparse the original setting. The world of experience, at every turn, is just too rich to be completely contained in human reports. Therefore, the Embracer is forced to make choices, and more importantly, omissions. However, the Embracer is not temperamentally suited to making these choices and omissions. Such choices often seem to the Embracer to be merely examples of failing to perform the observational task to its fullest extent.

B

The Photographer

The Photographer is an observer who is overwhelmingly visual. For the Photographer, observation *is* looking. Findings from other sensory modalities may be duly noted, but most of them are intimately linked or even grounded in the visual record. For example, suppose we are observing and a dog wanders onto the scene. Because we *saw* the dog, we note its bark and its smell. If the dog had been out of our visual range, and we had only heard its bark, then, more likely than not, the bark would not have been recorded in our observational protocols.

The positive side to the Photographer stance is the fact that visual information is incredibly useful and important to all of us, and a careful visual record is more often than not a highly useful record. It is also the record that is usually most familiar and most compelling. For many of us, seeing is the beginning and the end of observation. By staying within the visual frame, the Photographer is actually addressing observational issues that are traditionally most important for research.

On the negative side, however, is the realization that sometimes focusing on the visual array causes us to miss crucial information unfolding via other sensory modalities. Because we depend so much on our sense of sight, we often shortchange our other sensory modalities. These other modalities are crucial for complete observing.

There is a great deal of difference between turning first to the visual record and staying exclusively within the visual record. Unless there are compelling reasons to do otherwise, there is nothing wrong with the first position. It is the overdependence or exclusive dependence on the visual record that can get us into trouble as qualitative observers.

(C) The Tape Recorder

The Tape Recorder is an observer who is drawn toward sounds and sound patterns. Usually, the Tape Recorder is drawn most deeply to human speech and conversation. All of us know the importance of language, but no one is more aware of this than the Tape Recorder. For the Tape Recorder, instances of speech take precedence over any and all other events on the scene.

The positive side to the Tape Recorder stance is the fact that speech is critical for most human interactions, and the Tape Recorder is well-situated and well-disposed to taking full advantage of the richness of such speech. In qualitative research, transcripts of verbal records usually play an important role. Observers who are keenly aware of the nuances of verbal communication often uncover subtle cues and bits of information that would elude a less careful listener.

On the negative side, too often speech per se is overrated as a source of information. Anyone who has wrestled with the problem of interpreting transcripts knows this. How was something said? What were the facial expressions of the speaker? The mannerisms? How did the listener react nonverbally to what was said? If the observational record is strictly verbal, then it is difficult or impossible to answer such important questions.

Are there Tape Recorders who are attuned to sounds other than speech? Perhaps, but I have not come across any in my classes. Those students who concentrated on documenting sounds when there were no other people in the setting were quick to shift to documenting speech records when other people came upon the scene. If they were observing in settings where there were no other people, I usually found an initial focus on sound eventually faded into an awareness of other sensory inputs, usually visual. That is why I feel that the Tape Recorder is really primed for the appearance of a verbal encounter.

(G) The Categorizer

The Categorizer is an observer who creates sorting categories and assigns observations to them as a basic and ongoing part of the observational process. Each major datum point is assigned a place within the developing category process.

One of the most popular forms of qualitative research, namely grounded theory, is in many ways a formalized and refined version of the Categorizer stance. Grounded theory reflects the positive side to the Categorizer stance. When we categorize, we organize. The process of observing becomes an active and evolving process of

understanding. If we are particularly skilled Categorizers, then we also enrich and expand our observational processes to take advantage of the richer picture we are building of the scene.

As with any other observational strategies, there is of course a negative side to the Categorizer stance. Primarily, it is difficult to split our attention between observing and organizing simultaneously. If we are not careful, we tend to allow our organizational structure to sway our observing, instead of vice versa. Once we start to build a categorical scheme, it is harder than we might suppose to modify or even abandon it.

Before we leave the Categorizer type, however, we need to be aware of the dangers of being an ideological Categorizer. There is a crucial difference between a natural Categorizer and an ideological Categorizer.

Natural Categorizers gravitate immediately to the formation and elaboration of observational categories. For such people, finding and building categories is not particularly strenuous, and so it is not that hard to move back and forth between categorizing and observing without missing anything important.

Ideological Categorizers, however, are committed always and everywhere to being "scientific." They want to make sure that their observations fit into their pre-conceived ideas of what good research should be about. So they set out to force fit their observations into the sorts of categories they feel that good researchers would use.

The formation of categories is not a natural act for ideological Categorizers, but instead it is a major and taxing chore. In their response to the fear of being taken as "unscientific," ideological Categorizers tend to produce thin, stilted, and barren categories whose only virtue is that they are usually so pedestrian that they are totally uncontroversial.

There is no need to be reckless or bohemian as an observer. However, a misplaced zeal for "scientific" precision and accuracy more often than not produces an observational record of dubious worth. In short, if the categories flow naturally, do not worry about being a Categorizer. If, however, you find yourself laboriously editing your language and thoughts, and limiting your observations to conform to some standard of objectivity, then abandon the use of categories as an observational tool. They are only keeping you from doing really interesting observational work.

F

The Baseline

The Baseline organizes experiences along some sort of temporal, or time, dimension. That temporal dimension can be as arbitrary as the act of recording an observation at predetermined time intervals, or as episodic as observing and noting critical events as they arise within the observational process.

The positive side of the Baseline stance is that it is sensitive to the role of time in the observational process. Too often, we take time for granted. But the skilled Baseline is aware of the role and place of time in the observational setting and the observational process. Some crucial aspects of a situation cannot be understood unless

and until their temporal characteristics are taken into account. This is particularly true of things that happen in cycles. Do certain things seem to occur at the same time of day? At the same time of year? These dimensions can be both subtle and crucial.

On the negative side, sometimes things just happen to be unfolding in time. Placing a temporal dimension on their presence can suggest a level of process that is just not there. One event may have just happened to occur at the beginning of the observation period, and another event may have just happened to occur at the end of the same period. Baseliners need to be careful not to draw too much of a process link between such events, without making sure that there is other evidence that they are related.

F The Abstracter

The Abstracter tries to be as objective as possible. In this way, the Abstracter resembles a Categorizer. There are important differences, however. Categorizers tend to focus on categories that allow for descriptive organization. Therefore, observations that fall into the evolving categories can still be rich in sensory data. With Abstracters, however, there is a move up to a more abstract level of description. Specific sensory information is less important for these observers, while overall conceptual links become more important. In other words, Abstracters tend to look on the observation process as an intellectual task, first and foremost.

On the positive side, Abstracter reports are the easiest to coordinate directly with other, scientifically oriented, research efforts. The intellectual character of such findings also allows for easy integration into other forms of theoretical thinking. The skilled Abstracter is also more likely to see more complex, higher order patterns in the observational data.

On the negative side, the Abstracters can sometimes strive so completely to be objective that they actually discard crucial information that is not easily translated into objective accounts. There is nothing wrong with Abstract forms of observation, of course. The problem lies in their exclusive use. For one thing, highly intellectualized and abstract observations tend to be less specific and less richly invested with concrete sensory information. In their rush to move to the abstract level, Abstracters have to be careful to leave behind enough of a sensory record to allow others to interpret and evaluate their observations at more basic levels.

G The Interacter

The Interacter sees observation as the study of people, and so pays attention to persons in settings and their interactions. The Interacter obviously chooses settings that will guarantee the presence of people.

On the positive side, there are few things more interesting to people than other people. By observing others in a skillful way, Interacters can help us see important

aspects about our culture and ourselves as played out in natural and unforced settings. Such information is potentially of the highest use to any social scientist.

On the negative side, Interactors can run the risk of missing important cues from the setting that do not involve people in any explicit way. Does it matter, for instance, that the bench upon which a couple is sitting is made of concrete instead of wood? What about the fact that they are sitting under a maple tree? The concrete sidewalk is broken and in general poor repair—does this matter? Interactors have to remember that human interactions, as fascinating as they are, take place within physical settings that confine, and sometimes define, the nature of those interactions.

A skilled Interactor is not a voyeur. It is unethical and probably unhealthy to observe complex and extended human interactions without all parties knowing that such an observation is taking place.

H

The Reflector

The Reflector tends to see observation at least in part as an exercise in self-discovery, and so constantly monitors the impact of these observational experiences on himself or herself.

On the positive side, the Reflector stance is one of the most humane of all observational processes. When we read the work of a skilled and careful Reflector, we can almost look through that person's eyes. Skilled Reflectors focus and reflect on those things that are universal and significant to other human beings. The process of self-discovery can then serve as a guide for other persons as well.

On the negative side, the Reflector stance can be prone to narcissism. In this case, the process is not one of self-discovery and growth, but of self-absorption. The Reflector does not learn anything new about himself or herself, and the poor reader is treated to a self-indulgent and tiresome account as a result.

The Reflector is closest in nature to the speculative inquirers of the mirror tradition, and so Reflectors can learn much by studying that tradition. The best speculative researchers in the past were careful enough to hold the mirror of nature at arm's length so that they could see more than their own faces, metaphorically speaking. Skilled Reflectors follow that same process when they function as qualitative research observers.

WORKING WITH OBSERVATIONAL TYPES

First of all, try your best to identify your own observational style. Feel free to use the categories above to help you decide, but do not feel bound by them. Also, don't worry about being a pure anything, observation-wise. Sometimes, the particular setting has a lot to say about the way we employ our observational skills. However, you can identify some of your comfort zones as an observer, and understand them as personal

areas of strength. As with anything else, it is better to work from your strengths to improve and refine your observational skills.

Secondly, you can work on integrating other observational types into your own natural style. Here, you are going beyond merely practicing other observational stances. Reflect instead on the positives and strengths that are manifested by each particular observational style. Then, try to put some of those strengths to work in your own observations. At first, this will be very difficult. Also, your observational results will suffer while you are practicing these unfamiliar skills. If you are patient with yourself, though, you can reap some real benefits as a more balanced observer.

Finally, all of us can work on our ability to be more divergent observers. Remember that the twin forces of "maintenance" and "convergence" usually lead us to latch onto what is most active and most obvious in our given observational settings. However, as often as not, the really interesting things in a particular observational setting are happening at the edges and boundaries of awareness. Don't be afraid to spend some time looking into corners and under rocks, observationally speaking. After all, if we are taking a lantern approach toward searching for meaning, we need to move around and look in unfamiliar places.

GROUNDING OBSERVATIONAL SKILLS

So far, we have been talking about observational issues from an informal perspective. We also need to ground these skills within classic and current qualitative research thinking. Adler and Adler (1994) summarize many of the key points that currently impact the practice of observation in qualitative research. Some of the key issues they raise are: (1) subordination; (2) selection issues; (3) focus issues; and (4) saturation.

Subordination. Observation is often viewed as subordinate to other aspects of research. By this, we mean that we rarely just observe, and in addition, observation is rarely the primary strategy we adopt when collecting data. At best, observation is most often seen as part of the process, or as a means to a larger and more complex methodological end.

Gold (1958) lays out one of the earliest examples of this overall perspective. Gold locates observation along a four-stage continuum that also addresses participation. The complete observer, who is rare, simply watches. More often we find either the observer-as-participant, or the participant-as-observer. The difference between these last two strategies is a matter of involvement. The observer-as-participant is joining in, but mostly to observe. The participant-as-observer is more involved, but has still made it clear to the others involved that they are under observation. Finally, we occasionally may find the use of the complete participant, where the researcher is simply a member of the group under study. Complete observation and complete

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L. J. Hall

participation can both be morally suspect if the groups involved have no notion of the research aims and purposes of the researcher.

As you strive to find the role that observation plays in your approach to qualitative research, you will need to be clear on the subordination question. Does observation usually play a central role in your work? Or does it take a backseat to other modes of collecting data? Why do you work the way you do? Is it a function of the questions you ask, the way you like to collect data, or both?

Selection issues. Selection issues deal with how a researcher goes about choosing where and whom to observe. Obviously, these selection issues are driven by the goals and purposes of the given research project. Let us look at each issue in turn.

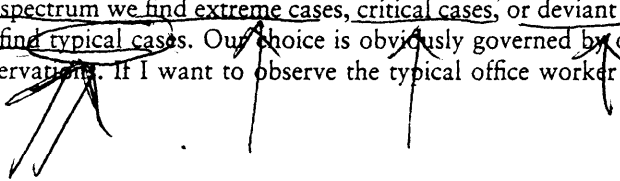
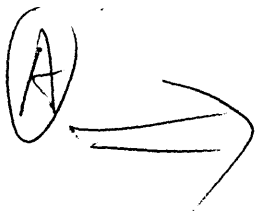
The first issue to address in the selection process concerns where to do your observing. Choosing a setting is a crucial part of the observation process. Some site selection issues are obvious. If you are looking for a particular type of behavior or a particular type of person, is there a high probability of finding each in the site you have selected? Is your site manageable? That is, have you chosen a site that you can observe without being overwhelmed? Think back to the exercise at the beginning of this chapter. Even though you deliberately selected an "empty" place, remember how busy and involved and complex it really was. Make sure you do not bite off more than you can chew, site-wise, or you will end up missing most of the important things you want to observe.

Finally, there are several key logistical issues related to site selection. Is the site safe? Can you be sure that observing on this site will not compromise your personal safety, or do you need a guide or protector? Or do you need to leave this observation task to someone else? Do you need permission, either formal or informal, to observe on this site? If you need permission, from whom do you need it? Will your presence change the sorts of behaviors or interactions that you are there to observe? If so, how do you minimize the impact of your own presence? These and other logistical matters are often not apparent until you are actually on site doing observation. So you need to be aware of their potential presence, and monitor your own presence as an observer.

The second major selection issue deals with whom you are observing. Kuzel (1999) reviews the complex issue of how we go about getting a sample of persons for qualitative research in general. There are three basic sampling strategies we can use to decide whom to observe. Each strategy encompasses a "family" of selection processes.

The first strategy is the personal characteristic strategy. Here, we focus in on some characteristic or set of characteristics of the persons we choose. We can choose to look along a dimension from maximum variation to homogeneity. At one end of the spectrum we find extreme cases, critical cases, or deviant cases. At the other end we find typical cases. Our choice is obviously governed by our purposes for doing observation. If I want to observe the typical office worker at lunch, for instance,

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then I would employ a different selection strategy from the one I would use, say, to find the best office worker in New York City.

(B)

The second strategy is the theoretical sampling strategy. Here you are sampling with a purpose. The purpose can be demographic, as in stratified and modified random samples. The purpose can also be more directly based on testing theory, such as theoretical or criterion sampling strategies. Finally, you can select participants who are either politically or informationally rich sources of data.

= where to look

(C)

The third and final strategy is the pure logistical strategy. Here, often because of the trickiness of the problem or the setting, you are willing to take what you can get. Convenience samples, opportunistic samples, and snowball samples are examples of this strategy. Convenience sampling is the least systematic. With an opportunistic sample, you are acting a bit like a detective, tracking down leads. With the snowball sample, you are depending on previous participants to refer you to new participants.

Site selection and person selection are critically important decisions. As long as you understand up front why you are observing where you are observing, and why you are observing whom you are observing, ~~then you are probably on the right track~~.

why am I observing

Focus

Focus issues. What sorts of things do we choose to concentrate on as observers? One of the first and most important models of observation (Spradley, 1980) is based on starting with description and then shifting to more focused matters. We will use this model as the basis for bringing up key focus issues for observation.

Spradley's (1980) model begins the process of observational research with an activity he calls the "grand tour" observation. A grand tour observation strategy is a comprehensive observation plan that addresses the following issues (p. 78):

1. Space. What does the physical place or places look like? Is this a common or unique type of setting? How might the setting restrict certain possible activities and interactions? How might it encourage others?
2. Actor. Who are the people involved? Why are they present? Is their presence usual or unusual? Are they related in any fashion to other people present?
3. Activity. What are people doing? How are these activities related to each other? Are they expected or unexpected? Are they easy or skilled activities?
4. Object. What are the physical "props" in this particular setting? What roles do they play? How would the setting change if these objects were not here? How would the activities of the participants change if these objects were missing?
5. Act. An act is a single event performed by a participant. How common is it? Is it related to other's acts? Are other people doing the same or similar acts?
6. Event. An event is a set of related activities that people carry out. How do we know when acts come together to make events? Which events are most common? Which events seem to be most important? Do people coordinate events?

7. *Time.* What kinds of sequencings can be observed? Are these sequences cyclical or unique? Are they apparent or subtle? How are they linked to the physical nature of the setting? To the motives of the participants?
8. *Goal.* What sorts of things are the participants trying to accomplish? How are these goals present in the setting and the actions? Are they steady or do they change?
9. *Feelings.* What sorts of emotions are being expressed by the participants? How can you be sure? What sorts of feelings does this setting bring out in you?

Spradley held that, as we shift from description to focus, we also shift from descriptive matters to structural matters. That is, as we get observational answers to what we see, when we see it, who does it, and the like, then we are in the position to start thinking about some initial answers to "why" questions. Observation by itself is not enough to build these structures of understanding, however. We need more direct participation with the persons involved, if at all possible.

While society and research methods have changed a great deal since Spradley's day, his advice still rings true for many circumstances. The world has become more complex, more global, more fragmented, more politically aware, and more gendered. Angrosino and de Perez (2000) is a good starting place for looking at how current thinking has brought about a shift in our understanding of both the context and the methods we use for making research observations.

Saturation. One of the more common guidelines used in current qualitative research is the strategy of saturation. First laid out by Glaser and Strauss (1967), saturation simply means that you have studied in a particular setting long enough so that you are now only finding things that you have already found. While this principle is often found in observation activities, it obviously extends to interviewing, document collection, and most other forms of qualitative data gathering.

Saturation most often makes its presence known in observation via the process of anticipation. Suppose you are watching a group of people engage in some complex task. When you find that you can anticipate and predict what they will do, and predict the consequences of their actions, then you are probably pretty close to the saturation point. Ease of categorization is another giveaway. If you can effortlessly assign each and every act or occurrence to pre-existing categories, then you have probably exhausted the uniqueness of this particular observational setting.

In a way, the concept of saturation is simply a restatement of the law of diminishing returns. There is no way that you can be sure that you have observed everything that you are likely to find in a given setting. The patterns of repetition you are experiencing, though, make it less likely that investing any more observational time and effort will pay off with any really new or unique observational experiences. We will

A FINAL LOOK AT OBSERVATION

If we return to our three technologies of looking from Chapter One, we can use them to help us sort out some of the key observational issues that we experience as practicing qualitative researchers.

* *Observation and the mirror.* Several of our observational types are mirror inquirers at heart. In particular, the Reflector and the Interactor seek out circumstances and other people as sources of personal introspection and growth. So long as we are not self-absorbed or self-deluded, this is not a bad path. We have to be aware, however, that there are times when we need to step out of the way and let the record speak for itself.

Observation and the window. Most of us try to follow the implicit rules of the current culture of inquiry and be good windows. The Camera, the Tape Recorder, and especially the Embracer all start out with sensory data as the bedrock for observation. The Baseline and the Categorizer impose a temporal and conceptual structure, respectively, as the "basic frame" of the window, and the Abstracter is busy creating scientific findings as an integral part of the observation process. So long as we do not try to hide our own thoughts and feelings behind an artificial veil of "objectivity," we can be very effective as observers from any of these stances. We have to be aware, however, that there are times when we need to step forward and make our voices heard over and above the record.

Observation and the lantern. Most of the observation types we have found so far are rooted in the older and more familiar mirror and window traditions. We have not identified specific observer types for the lantern metaphor, so let us do so now. Here are three to start with, for your consideration and rumination.

Our first lantern observer is the Spelunker. A Spelunker is a person who goes underground into caverns, carrying a light into these dark recesses. Traditional ethnographers, or people who venture into strange and alien cultures with the intent to survive and learn, are good examples of Spelunkers.

The second lantern observer is the Detective. A Detective is a person who is committed to looking carefully and systematically to see what others have not seen, to uncover order that is there to be found. Interpretative researchers of all types tend to have a strong Detective streak in them.

Our last lantern observer is the Diogenist. This observer is named after Diogenes from Greek myth. Diogenes was the man who wandered the earth, bearing a lantern, searching for an honest man. Diogenists are qualitative researchers who refuse to acknowledge that qualitative research must abandon the concept of truth. For them, truth is often grounded in humane conduct, so that the honest man is also the moral man. Action researchers, particularly those who follow a path toward liberation, are good examples of Diogenists.