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Analysing Observations

Amir B. Marvasti

Observation is the foundation of science. Specifically, to the extent that empirical evidence is used to test theories or advance knowledge, observation is the backbone of all scientific research. Observational methods emerged alongside scientific methods; in fact, the two are often used interchangeably. The history of observational methods parallels the history of sciences as a whole. Lorraine Daston and Elizabeth Lunbeck nicely describe the overall importance of observations in the introduction to their edited book *Histories of Scientific Observation*:

Observation is the most pervasive and fundamental practice of all modern sciences, both natural and human. It is also among the most refined and variegated. Observation educates the senses, calibrates judgment, picks out objects of scientific inquiry, and forges “thought collectives.” Its instruments include not only the naked senses, but also tools such as the telescope and the microscope, the questionnaire, the photographic plate, the glassed-in beehive, the Geiger counter, and a myriad of other ingenious inventions designed to make the invisible visible, the evanescent permanent, and the abstract concrete. Where is society? How blue is the sky? Which ways do X-rays scatter? Over the course of centuries, scientific observers have devised ways to answer these and many other riddles. (2011: 1)

While a full treatment of the history and nature of ‘scientific observation’ is beyond the scope of this chapter, two things are worth noting here. First, it took centuries for what we now consider ‘scientific observation’ to be separated from wisdom, experience, intuition, feeling, and divine knowledge. Second, ‘scientific observation’ could refer to a wide array of data collected in the course of empirical research. In the social sciences, this means observations can be based on surveys, in-depth interviews (see Roulston, [Chapter 20](#), this volume), focus groups (see Barbour, [Chapter 21](#), this volume), and participant observation, to name a few examples. For the purpose of this chapter, I especially focus on the analysis of ethnographic observations (whether they are heard or seen in the field).

I begin the chapter with a general description of ethnography (see Gubrium and Holstein, [Chapter 3](#), this volume), with an emphasis on making sense of the observer–observed relationship as a type of ‘provisional analysis’ (Becker, 1958: 653) in its own right. I then offer three strategies (descriptive, inductive, and constructionist) for the analysis of observational data using examples from my own ethnographic research on homelessness and other sources.

I end the chapter with a brief discussion of strategies for evaluating and representing analysis of observations.

Observer–Observed Relationships in the Field

Ethnographic techniques of observation have a long and well-established history in the social sciences, particularly in the fields of anthropology and sociology. Ethnography (literally translated ‘writing about culture’) essentially involves a researcher observing and recording human behavior in a particular setting (often referred to as ‘the field’). The strength of this approach, compared to closed-ended surveys or experimental designs is that it allows the researcher to directly observe the many nuances and contingencies of human behavior as they become manifest in a ‘natural’ setting (i.e., the field). Of course, what the researchers actually see or hear in the field and how they interpret it are both filtered through the researchers' orientation toward the object of the observations. In other words, the researchers' substantive focus and analysis are mediated by the way they relate to the object of analysis.

Quite likely no other tradition of data collection has engendered more theorizing (or hand-wringing) about the relationship between the observer and the observed than ethnographic research. This is evidenced by the numerous volumes written on the topic (see, for example, *Emotions in the Field* (Davies and Spencer, 2010), *Others Knowing Others*, (Fowler and Hardesty, 1994), *Observers Observed* (Stocking, 1983)). More than two decades ago, James Clifford cogently framed the emerging analytical problem as an ‘impossible attempt’:

Anthropological fieldwork has been represented as both the scientific ‘laboratory’ and a personal ‘rite of passage.’ The two metaphors capture nicely the discipline's impossible attempt to fuse objective and subjective practices. Until recently, this impossibility was masked by marginalizing the intersubjective foundations of fieldwork, by excluding them from serious ethnographic texts, relegating them to prefaces, memoirs, anecdotes, confessions, and so forth. Lately, this set of disciplinary rules is giving way. ... Much of our knowledge about other cultures must now be seen as contingent, the problematic outcome of intersubjective dialogue, translation, and projection. This poses fundamental problems for any science that moves predominantly from the particular to the general, that can make use of personal truths only as examples of typical phenomena or as exceptions to collective patterns. (1986: 109)

In the 20 years or so since, ethnographers have tried to solve the riddle of the ‘impossible attempt’ by more systematically exploring the reflexive relationship between the researcher self

and the observed other (see May and Perry, [Chapter 8](#), this volume). As a whole, new approaches to writing and analysing field observations are more inclined to acknowledge the presence of the observer. Amanda Coffey's *The Ethnographic Self* nicely underlines this shift:

In writing, remembering, and representing our fieldwork experiences we are involved in processes of self representation and identity construction. In considering and exploring the intimate relations between the field, significant others and the private self we are able to understand the process of field work as practical, intellectual and emotional accomplishment (1999: 1; see also 'The relational self and its stories' in Gubrium and Holstein, 2008: 243–5).

Thus in this chapter I emphasize that the act of observing is done from a certain analytic position toward the object. To illustrate this point, consider, for example, the different ways people observe the objects in an art museum. Years ago I visited a museum of modern art with my elderly father. We were looking at some abstract paintings, and my father asked, 'Is this art?' I replied, 'Yes. In fact, these paintings were done by *famous* artists and are very *expensive*,' hoping to reorient my father's view of the painting toward the dimensions of fame and value. My father, however, remained unconvinced: 'A child could do this. I don't see it.' My point is that how we see something involves a certain orientation that in turn shapes the meaning we attribute to the object. This means that the interpretation and related analysis of observations is foreshadowed by the researcher's orientation toward, or relationship with, that which is being observed. In the next section, I offer three ways of conceptualizing the observer-observed relationship in the context of ethnographic research (for a similar treatment of interviewer-interviewee duality see Gubrium and Holstein, 2002).

Roles

In my view, the most salient conceptualization of the observer-observed interconnection is found in Patricia and Peter Adler's *Membership Roles in Field Research* (1987; see also Gold, 1958). The authors begin with the assumption that a researcher's position in the field reflects a combination of personal choices, theoretical orientation, and structural necessities (1987: 52–3). From there, the Adlers discuss three possible roles in the field, corresponding to the continuum of complete observer to complete participant. The first of these is 'peripheral membership,' which implies marginal involvement in what is being observed. By contrast, the second type of field role, 'active membership,' involves:

far more profound *effects on the researcher's self* than are generated by peripheral membership involvement. In functioning as a member, researchers get swept up into many of the same experiences as members. While this has the distinct advantage of

adding their own selves as data to the research, both as a cross-check against the accounts of others and as a deepened awareness of how members actually think and feel, it propels researchers through various changes. (1987: 64)

With the third category of membership, 'complete participant,' the goal is to achieve a sort of unconditional belonging in the world of the other, further closing the gap between the observed and the observer:

The complete membership role entails the greatest commitment on the part of the researcher. Rather than experiencing more participatory involvement, complete-member-researchers ... immerse themselves fully in the group as 'natives.' They and their subjects relate to each other as status equals, dedicated to sharing in a common set of experiences, feelings, and goals. (1987: 67)

The complete participant is an observer whose viewpoint is presumably the same as those being studied. In this context, the observer's claims to insider knowledge become as valid as any other member in the field. The three categories of membership are useful as general guides, but, as the Adlers note, these roles are difficult to distinguish from one another in practice as they 'shift and evolve' in the field (1987:14).

A corollary to this discussion is the matter of 'covert' and 'overt' observer roles. The issue here is whether the observed is aware that his or her conduct is being recorded for the purpose of analysis. There are at least two facets to this debate. First, some believe that if people know they are being watched, they will change their conduct, so a covert role would provide more objective observations. Second, and perhaps more important in the era of institutional review boards (IRBs), is the ethics of doing research (see Mertens, [Chapter 35](#), this volume) without obtaining informed consent (see Calvey, 2008), and this is where 'covert' research faces the greatest opposition. For example, the British Association of Sociology has taken the position that:

covert methods violate the principles of informed consent and may invade the privacy of those being studied. Participant or non-participant observation in non-public spaces or experimental manipulation of research participants without their knowledge should be resorted to only where it is impossible to use other methods to obtain essential data. (Cited in Calvey, 2008: 907)

However, as David Calvey points out, while there are good ethical reasons not to spy on people, covert research is not without its justifications:

Covert research is part of a somewhat submerged tradition that needs to be recovered for future usage in its own right rather than being treated correctively as teaching material for cases of 'failed or bad ethics'. ... Moreover, research in this mould is a tradition that has significantly shaped, often in controversial ways, debates about the research relationship. My deep concern is that, in the present context of governance, we develop forms of 'methodological hypochondria'. This is not a belligerent stance nor a heroic portrayal of the covert researcher as, quite clearly, covert research is not appropriate for certain sensitive topics. ... For me, covert research has a potentially creative and imaginative part to play and a voice to be heard in the sociological community. (2008: 914)

Rapport

Rapport can be viewed as having greater understanding of and entrance into the world of the other. Thus building and maintaining rapport is a key component of observational research. One of the earliest references to the significance of rapport can be found in Harriet Martineau's *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (originally published in 1838, and arguably the first how-to book on qualitative research):

Unless a traveller interprets by his sympathies what he sees, he cannot but misunderstand the greater part of that which comes under his observation. He will not be admitted with freedom into the retirements of domestic life; the instructive commentary on all the facts of life, discourse, will be of a slight and superficial character. People will talk to him of the things they care least about, instead of seeking his sympathy about the affairs which are deepest in their hearts. He will be amused with public spectacles, and informed of historical and chronological facts; but he will not be invited to weddings and christenings; he will hear no love-tales; domestic sorrows will be kept as secrets from him; the old folks will not pour out their stores to him, nor the children bring him their prattle. (1838: 43)

In her own eloquent and pre-disciplinary-jargon language, Martineau highlights the intricate links between 'sympathy,' rapport, and quality of observations. She makes it clear that without a sufficiently close relationship with the people being observed, the observer at most is afforded a superficial glance of the other's world.

Contemporary field researchers employ a variety of strategies to establish rapport with their respondents. Self-disclosure (sharing with respondents relevant details of one's own life) is arguably the easiest way to build rapport. In fact, it is not uncommon for research participants to make direct inquiries about the background and interests of the observer. The following

excerpt from Leigh Berger's ethnography of a synagogue illustrates this process:

Rabbi Levinson smiles warmly at me, his gray beard crinkling and his dark eyes lighting up behind his glasses. 'Let me ask you a question. Do you come from a religious family?'

'Not exactly. My parents are not religious at all. But my grandparents were. They kept kosher and my grandfather walked to synagogue,' I reply. 'I think their belief is one reason I've always been drawn to try and understand faith,' I confess.

He nods. 'Yes. My grandfather was a religious man as well. He is one reason why I love religion so much. You were close with your grandparents?'

'Very.' I smile with warmth of family memories. (2001: 512)

On the other hand, some ethnographers question the value of rapport and assert that it is possible to get too close to the world of the other (i.e., 'go native'). Accordingly, an unreflective affinity with research participants biases the analysis. In this context, analytical detachment is valued over empathic understanding. Such seemingly diametrical positions on the significance of rapport in observational research serve to underline the assertion that the observer's method of relating to the observed involves analytical standpoints corresponding to whether the observations are to be treated as objective facts or collaborative and subjective constructions. While the first two positions discussed thus far (roles and rapport) remain somewhat faithful to the notion of capturing an external, objective world, the next mode of observation concerns itself almost entirely with the subjective self.

Observing the Researcher Self

With this model of conceptualizing the observer-observed dichotomy, the researcher self takes center stage. Here the gap between the observer and the observed is dissolved altogether by allowing the two to become one and the same, as in this example from Carol Ronai's story of her life with an abusive father and a mentally retarded mother:

My father, Frank Gross (no lie, pronounced 'Grass') Rambo, had a police record as a child molester, a rapist, and an exhibitionist. He was also violent. Even though we were on public assistance, our lives were much calmer during the time he was in prison. Her beating me [referring to her mother] was an enormous betrayal. Yes, I needed to be disciplined, but this was not a spanking. This was the kind of beating Frank dished out. (1996: 121)

What is referred to as 'autoethnography,' particularly 'evocative or emotional autoethnography' (Ellis, 1997; see also Ellis, 1991), turns the observer's attention inward and treats self-reflection as empirical observation in its own right:

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward exposing a vulnerable self. (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 739)

Norman Denzin (1997) has noted that the approach has the added advantage of addressing the problems surrounding how to best represent human experience. In his words, 'bypass the representational problem by invoking an epistemology of emotion, moving the reader to feel the feelings of the other' (1997: 228, cited in Anderson, 2006: 377). However, critics have voiced concern that too much emphasis on the observer self amounts to narcissism and erodes the scientific validity of the data (its connection with the empirical world), which presumably exists outside the self-reflexive observer's head.

One attempt to reign in the excesses of autoethnography is to counter it with the more traditional self-observational methods. So, for example, as an alternative to 'evocative autoethnography' Leon Anderson offers 'analytic autoethnography,' which in his words 'does contribute to a spiraling refinement, elaboration, extension, and revision of theoretical understanding' (2006: 388). Anderson goes on to argue, 'autoethnographic inquiry, which has been advocated primarily in recent years as a radically non-traditional, poststructuralist form of research, actually fits well with traditional symbolic interactionist ethnography' (2006: 391).

Another solution to unchecked analysis of the researcher self is something called 'systematic self-observation' (Rodriguez and Ryave, 2002), which involves training informants to methodically observe and record their own experiences in the field. Accordingly, '[systematic self-observation] generates data that are written in informants' own words and marked with their unique personal sensibilities, voices, perspectives, experiences, and points of view' (2002: 10). Presumably, this method allows the more systematic observer, the researcher, not the research participant, to maintain some sense of analytic detachment from the recorded observations.

So far in this chapter we have reviewed the significance of the researcher's position relative to those under study as a type of ongoing 'provisional analysis' (Becker, 1958: 653) that informs how observations are collected in the field. The remainder of the chapter considers the more explicit and finite task of making sense of recorded observations.

Analysis of Observations

In this section, I review methods of analysing observations building on the previous discussion about observer–observed relationships. My focus here is how observations are transformed from loosely connected records of encounters between the researcher self and the other into documented analysis.

Description as Analysis

In the social sciences (with the exception of subfields such as visual anthropology) all observations either begin as written texts (e.g., newspapers and other mass media texts – see Hodgetts and Chamberlain, [Chapter 26](#), this volume) or are transformed from the visual and audible to the written text (e.g., recorded field notes or transcribed interviews; see Kowal and O'Connell, [Chapter 5](#), and Roulston, [Chapter, 20](#), this volume). Consequently, the simplest way to represent observations is to only describe them – write them down as you see them.

Among qualitative researchers, ethnographers in particular, observations from the field (eyewitness accounts of places and behaviors) are typically used to describe the setting, or to provide a social context for what people say in the field about themselves and others. The most elaborate ethnographic descriptions are generally in sections where the authors attempt to convey the ambiance of the setting where the observations were collected. The following excerpt is from my own ethnography of a homeless shelter:

Only a few blocks away from downtown, placed between a funeral home and a fire station, the pastel green Abbot House building was surrounded by a six-foot wall and chain-link fences. The occasional sound of a fire truck siren rushing to an emergency combined with the smell of burning flesh from the funeral home's crematorium completed the gloomy picture of poverty amid the modern urban landscape. The across-the-street convenience store displayed a flashing neon sign advertising beer to the presumably vulnerable residents of the shelter, and the nearby city park provided a suitable location for the consumption of recently purchased alcohol, thanks to generous contributions from university students, who during their weekend escapades in the downtown entertainment district were either too drunk or too scared to snub a street person. (Marvasti, 2002: 619)

As this excerpt shows, the description of the setting sets up the stage for the forthcoming empirical documentation and is to some degree analytical in its own right. Indeed, labeling this kind of writing as purely 'descriptive' is somewhat misleading as it is based on a false duality between raw observation and refined analysis. As Robert Emerson notes:

What is included or excluded ... is not determined randomly; rather, the process of looking and reporting are guided by the observer's implicit or explicit concepts that make some details more important and relevant than others. Thus, what is selected for observation and recording reflects the working theories or conceptual assumptions employed, however implicitly, by the ethnographer. To insist on a sharp polarity between description and analysis is thus misleading; description is necessarily analytic. (1988: 20; see also Geertz's discussion of 'thick description,' 1988)

This implies that to some extent there is no such thing as 'raw data.' To illustrate this point further, let us consider the most evidentiary of all recorded observations, the film (see Mikos, [Chapter 28](#), this volume). We are all familiar with the saying 'a picture is worth a thousand words,' presumably because a photographic image is a flawless mode of recording an object of interest. In the earlier part of the twentieth century visual anthropologists did just that as they earnestly tried to record on film their field observations in such classics as Robert Flaherty's 1922 silent documentary *Nanook of the North*. However, in recent decades the authenticity of the photographic representation of the field (along with other claims about capturing reality 'in the raw,' pure, or pristine form) has come under assault. Consider the following sarcastic characterization of the visual anthropologists' claims to realism:

There is a tribe, known as ethnographic filmmakers, who believe they are invisible. They enter a room where a feast is being celebrated, or the sick cured, or the dead mourned, and, though weighted down with odd machines, entangled with wires, imagine they are unnoticed – or, at most, merely glanced at, quickly ignored, later forgotten. Outsiders know little of them, for their homes are hidden in the partially uncharted rainforests of the Documentary. Like other Documentarians they survive by hunting and gathering information. Unlike others of the filmic groups, most prefer to consume it raw. ... Their handicrafts are rarely traded, and are used almost exclusively among themselves. Produced in great quantities, the excess must be stored in large archives. (Weinberger, 1994:3–4, cited in Grimshaw, 2001: 1)

The point is that the observer is always implicated in the act of observing and recording, no matter how refined, or analytically pure, the technique of observation and recording.

Inductive Analysis

What I have in mind here is analysis that moves from the specific to the general, where the general would represent a concrete and objective finding that is logically and empirically backed by the analysis. The best-known strategy for inductive analysis of qualitative

observations is 'grounded theory' (see Thornberg and Charmaz, [Chapter 11](#), this volume; see also Athens, 2010, and Charmaz, 2008) where specific field observations gradually lead the researcher to generalized 'plausible relationships proposed among concepts and sets of concepts' (Strauss and Corbin, 1994: 278). The following excerpt from Elijah Anderson's ethnography provides a poignant example of how a seemingly trivial observation (i.e., the fact that some African Americans prominently wear their institutional identification cards even outside their workplace) is inductively connected with a larger theoretical argument about the continuing struggle for civil rights:

The common identification card associates its holder with a firm, a corporation, a school, a union, or some other institution of substance and influence. Such a card, particularly from a prominent establishment, puts the police and others on notice that the youth is 'somebody,' thus creating an important distinction between a black man who can claim a connection with the wider society and one who is summarily judged as 'deviant.' Although blacks who are established in the middle class might take such cards for granted, many lower-class blacks, who continue to find it necessary to campaign for civil rights denied them because of skin color, believe that carrying an identification card brings them better treatment than is meted out to their less fortunate brothers and sisters. (1997: 145–6)

For another illustration of how one can go from specific observation to broader theoretical premise, I will use an example from my ethnography of a homeless shelter in which I linked a set of observations about a bathroom with a larger argument about how homelessness is deviant in part because it involves the unauthorized use of space. Basically, after many complaints about homeless clients relieving themselves in the parking lot of the shelter, it was decided an outside bathroom would remedy the problem. And it did. However, the bathroom was also used for less authorized purposes. For example, it afforded some the privacy they needed for injecting themselves with drugs away from the prying eyes of undercover police officers ('narcs'). Others used it for sexual rendezvous. Finally, on occasion it was used as a makeshift barbershop. All of this, of course, was the cause of some aggravation for the shelter staff who only wanted the space to be used for its official purpose. These observations were consistent with the theory that an important part of the public outcry about homelessness is about the unauthorized use of public spaces by people who do not have their own private spaces (Ruddick, 1996; Wright, 1997).

Another way of thinking about inductive analysis (moving from the particular to the general) is the transformation of general observations into specific measurements, or 'enumeration' (Goetz and LeCompte, 1981: 54). Ideally, this type of counting of observations would be done using

precise questions or surveillance regimens that could produce exact and easily quantifiable response categories. Where that is not possible in the field (as in the case of covert observations), the researcher would have to attend to measurable features of the field using a less regimented and more inductive process. So, for example, in my research on homelessness, I could begin with the observation that many older homeless clients appear to be intoxicated. From there I could move on to a more systematic observation and recording of the clients' age. Along with that, I could develop a profile or a checklist for the appearance of alcoholism (e.g., smell of alcohol, especially if present during the morning hours). The next step in the analysis would then be to establish a correlation between the signs of alcoholism and age among the homeless. Note that my conclusions, given the non-random nature of my sample and the lack of control variables, would at best constitute a sort of 'quasi-statistical support' (Becker, 1958: 656).

This does not imply that numbers and measurements are otherwise useless to field researchers. Indeed, even the most qualitatively oriented among us still speak of sample size (i.e., how many people or things were observed) in presenting our findings. However, in purely measurement-oriented analysis, observations are *only* meaningful to the extent that they can be used to count *something*. Indeed, one way of establishing the legitimacy of qualitative research is to suggest it can be used as a basis for developing more rigorous concepts and quantifiable measures later down the road. Once observations are transformed into quantified measures, the rest of the analysis is really about applying descriptive or inferential statistics to a data set.

Constructionist Analysis

In this type of analysis, rather than isolating, or inducing, an objective finding or fact, the goal is to uncover meaning-making processes that people in the field use to make sense of their world. Instead of mining the data for general and enduring concepts or patterns, constructionist analyses highlight particular and contextually meaningful processes. Unlike the descriptive analysis with its emphasis on a realistic depiction of the field, constructionist analysis is concerned with how participants create their social worlds using spoken and written words (whether these words are solicited through interviews or naturally occurring in the field). For example, consider the following excerpt from my observations at a homeless shelter. In this excerpt, Tim, a client, is about to end an intake interview with his social worker.

Social Worker: All right. Can you think of anything else?

Tim: I think that's probably got it.

Social Worker: Okay.

Tim: That's got me fixed up. Not unless you got any million-dollar checks?

Social Worker: Um, let me check my drawers here. [They both laugh.]

Tim: Okay, remember when we were talking about, you know, what was it, World War, World War I and II veterans? [They were] supposed to have some allies in Burma, you know. Uh, Burma, and Algiers, all different kinds of places, you know, where they, and they – you know, army people, military people are funny, you know, about money. Where it's at, who gets it and everything, you know. Who's acceptable, you know. They may not like someone because he may be a toughie. May not be any good. They say, “No, you ain't gonna get, no money. We don't like you.” And so you'll never get no money. ...

Social Worker: So what are you saying? You didn't get your money when you got out of the service?

Tim: No. Uh, I didn't get no million if I supposed to get one. I didn't get one. ...

Social Worker: Well, think about it, Tim. If they gave you a million dollars when you got discharged from the service, then everyone would join the service.

Tim: Right, uh-huh.

Social Worker: And they're not, so I don't – there may be some kind of separation pay. But it's not as much as a million bucks.

Tim: Uh-huh. [Pause] Well, that should do me, hon.

Social Worker: Okay.

Tim: Thanks much.

Social Worker: Okay. Well, as long as you keep cooperating and so forth while you're here, we'll have you through the weekend.

Tim: Okay. I thank you so much, dear. (Marvasti, 2002: 643–5)

I analysed this exchange using a constructionist narrative paradigm (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009) and focused on the way the social worker skillfully edits Tim's off-topic remarks. She does not necessarily engage his flights of fancy about a 'million-dollar check' or delve into

whether he has a legitimate claim as a disabled veteran. Instead, the social worker narratively makes the nonsense sensible by coaxing the client back to what is most relevant for his stay at the shelter: ‘cooperating and so forth.’ I compared this extract to others to suggest that who receives help at a homeless shelter (i.e., ‘service worthiness’; Spencer, 1994) is in part decided by how the staff edit client stories, and, in turn, how the clients respond to this sort of narrative intervention.

It would be an interesting exercise to apply the different analytical strategies discussed in this book (e.g., narrative analysis, see Esin et al., [Chapter 14](#); conversation analysis reports, see Toerien, [Chapter 22](#); discourse analysis, see Willig, [Chapter 23](#); and so on) to this data extract. Suffice it to say that the analysis of the observation in part depends on what the researcher chooses to focus on as the more revealing or the most relevant feature of the observation. In a sense, different analysts might see different things in the same bit of data (discourse, conversation, narrative). Note also that, depending on one's analytical framework, the observation might be completely useless. An experimental behaviorist, for example, will have no use for this exchange since there are no controls or clearly identifiable cause-and-effect variables to be analysed. Similarly, a conversation analyst might find such data less than useful, or just plain sloppy, because it lacks detailed transcriptions (e.g., special notations indicating the length of pauses in the conversation).

Looking at analysis and observing as interrelated components also sheds light on the question: What is the object of observation? The answer depends on what matters for the purpose at hand. The object of observation should not be confused with the taken-for-granted topic of analysis. Rather, what an observation represents is decided by one's disciplinary orientation and related methods and theories.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I approached the topic of analysing observations with an emphasis on the following questions:

- How does the observer–observed relationship influence what we see?
- How does one analyse observations from field research?

In addressing these questions, I followed the premise that analysis of observations cannot be separated from the interactional and theoretical framework within which observations are seen and known. In the words of Amanda Coffey and Paul Atkinson:

The process of analysis should not be seen as a distinct stage of research; rather, it is

a reflexive activity that should inform data collection, writing, further data collection, and so forth. Analysis is not, then, the last phase of the research process. It should be seen as part of the research design and of the data collection. The research process, of which analysis is one aspect, is a cyclical one. (1996: 6)

The three types of analyses and observer–observed relationships discussed here fall on a theoretical ‘subjective–objective continuum’ (Goetz and LeCompte, 1981: 54) that ranges from an emphasis on external qualities (describing the empirical facts as they *really* are) to constructive practices (understanding how facts are made meaningful by the people in the field). At the same time, it is possible to see the descriptive, inductive, and constructionist approaches as overlapping orientations toward making sense of observations in general. Indeed, any research manuscript based on observational techniques invariably includes a *description* of the setting before proceeding to the rigor of analysis. Similarly, as Kathy Charmaz (2008) has demonstrated, it is entirely possible for inductions gleaned from grounded theory to point to constructive practices. Therefore, the quality of the analysis should not be judged solely on the researcher’s unrelenting adherence to this or that particular technique, which happens to be in vogue at the time. Rather, in my view, ‘good’ analysis evinces the complementary qualities of the craft and science of research.

I have in mind here what Harry Wolcott describes as being ‘intellectually rigorous without succumbing to the rigor mortis of oversystematization’ (1994: 176). In the same vein, the eminent symbolic interactionist, Herbert Blumer, once cautioned sociologists against the overuse of concepts and ‘the tendency to manufacture them with reckless abandon’ (1969: 169). Blumer went on to say, ‘I suspect that this steady production of new concepts arises from the effort to pose as scientific and to be judged as profound and learned’ (1969: 169). Research findings (the product of analysis) should flow from the empirical observations and make sense. If the reader cannot understand how the researcher began with a particular set of observations and arrived at the findings, then the analysis has failed; and it means that in all likelihood the researcher could have written the findings with or without the actual observations from the field. As Blumer puts it:

As I see it, most improper usage of the concept in science comes when the concept is set apart from the world of experience, when it is divorced from the perception from which it has arisen and into which it ordinarily ties. Detached from the experience which brought it into existence, it is almost certain to become indefinite and metaphysical. (1969: 168)

To avoid this problem, I favor what Gubrium and Holstein call ‘cultivated tentativeness’ and

‘troubled curiosity’ (see Gubrium and Holstein, [Chapter 3](#), this volume). This means that fieldworkers should not succumb to ready-made answers to questions posed by their empirical observations. Instead, they should be open to ‘analytic inspiration’ (see Gubrium and Holstein, [Chapter 3](#), this volume) see their observations from multiple perspectives and resist the temptation to impose taken-for-granted concepts on what they observe in the field. However, it is important not to confuse ‘analytic inspiration’ with an anything-goes, sloppy view of ethnographic research. As Gubrium and Holstein put it, ‘Analytic inspiration isn’t license for procedural recklessness’ (see Gubrium and Holstein, [Chapter 3](#): p. 47, this volume).

In short, ‘bad analysis’ can be characterized as research that either lacks rigor and focus, or so rigidly adheres to methods that it artificially forces observations into predetermined categories. By comparison, ‘good’ analysis is both rigorous and flexible; it is guided by a healthy mix of ‘analytic inspiration’ and empiricism written for and directed at a particular audience (Silverman, 2005: 327).

The business of sharing one’s analysis with an audience invariably brings us into the realm of representational strategies. Analysis is rhetorical to the degree that the researcher has to convince readers that his or her observations correspond to the empirical observations at hand. Fortunately, there is a vast body of literature on writing qualitative research (see, for example, Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2008; Marvasti, 2008; Wolcott, 2008; see also Denzin, [Chapter 39](#), this volume). Relatedly, researchers like Laurel Richardson (2002) are at the forefront of a movement to create new aesthetics of writing and analysis. In her words, ‘Poetic representation ... is a practical and powerful, indeed transforming, method for understanding the social, altering the self, and invigorating the research community that claims knowledge of our lives’ (2002: 888). Such alternative practices aim to transcend the limitations of traditional science by turning to poetic forms and away from the more purely analytical text. In essence, such approaches try to create what the English poet, William Wordsworth, called ‘a heart that watches and receives’:

Our meddling intellect

Misshapes the beauteous form of things:-

We murder to dissect.

Enough of science and art;

Close these barren leaves.

Come forth, and bring with you a heart

That watches and receives.

(Excerpt from William Wordsworth's *The Tables Turned*, cited in Manly, 1907: 330)

However, it is important to keep a vigilant and critical eye on these practices as well, since no genre of representing social observations is inherently authentic (Marvasti and Faircloth, 2002). Indeed, it is exceedingly difficult to assume any 'heart' can simply 'watch and receive' with no ulterior motives. Another English poet, John Keats, once wrote: 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know' (*Ode on a Grecian Urn*, cited in Strachan, 2003: 156). It may be that the fusion of beauty and truth remains the fugitive goal of qualitative methods and analysis.

Further Reading

The readings listed below offer three somewhat different perspectives on transforming observations. Becker approaches data analysis as a process that moves in different stages (i.e., from 'provisional analyses' to 'final comprehensive analyses'). Goetz and LeCompte catalogue as contrasting pairs the many ways of conceptualizing analysis of observational data (e.g., 'enumerative' vs. 'constructive' and 'subjective' vs. 'objective'). Finally, Charmaz outlines strategies for incorporating both constructionist and objectivist concerns into a single analytical framework.

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