

Criminology 321 Interviews & Oral History cont'd



Oral History: How To

- Make sure you have time, privacy, free of distractions (phone, TV, interruption)
- Best to tape record, but always have Plan B
- Take notes that allow you to connect issues with tape
- Make eye contact, listen
- Consider giving tape to participant

Oral History: How To

- Digital technologies allow greater flexibility, less intrusiveness, and perhaps greater validity



Oral History: How To

- Questioning typically more open-ended; get people talking, telling their stories
- Ask “how” instead of “why”
- Use some structure – chronology; domains
- Don’t be afraid of silence: let people collect thoughts; put onus on participant to talk
- Triangulate wherever possible

Oral History: How To

- **Triangulation**
 - Supporting documents to stimulate discussion of personal experiences
 - Photographs, journals, diaries, letters, poetry, art, newspaper clippings
 - Documents about marginalized groups are difficult to find and more likely to have been produced by authorities

Oral History: Finding Meaning

Interpretive dilemma remains. What to do?

- Provide copies of transcripts for addition, clarification and feedback
- Discuss with interviewees the meaning of their stories prior to researcher's interpretation
- Arrange follow-up interview to discuss meaning of stories
- Exchange ideas and discuss misunderstandings while still at the draft stage
- However, difficult to be critical if sharing final product

Contextualizing, Connecting



Contextualizing, Connecting

- Note how this brief documentary (entitled *Chess Records and Chicago Blues History*) contextualizes the music:
 - Begins in the south: slaves, chain gangs
 - Moves north with “the great migration”
 - Importance of the guitar, electricity
 - Shows links with rock and roll

Contextualizing, Connecting

- Look at Borland article as an example of how to write up an oral history
- First we get the event: day at the races
- Then we get the frame – “Personal narrative as a meaning constructive” activity
- Gives us a dichotomy that makes it “interesting” – simply give voice *versus* actively interpret

Contextualizing, Connecting

- Then continues with
 - Methods: how she gathered data, negotiated the outcome
 - Results: what happened at each stage
 - Discussion: placing the study in larger context
 - Conclusion/Postscript: everything resolved; lessons learned

Criminology 321 / Week 8
*** Observation * Ethnography**
*** Field Research**



Observation/Ethnography/Field Research

- Called ethnography in anthropology
- Called participant observation in sociology
- Often called simply field research in criminology
- More than just looking; requires detail, texture, context, rigour ... time

Observation/Ethnography/Field Research

- May begin with a focus on
 - particular settings – generally these are small and localized
 - particular groups – more emphasis on shared culture
 - particular events, significance
 - oneself (autoethnography)

Observational Epistemology

- [E]thnographers typically make this major epistemological point: when they talk about *what people do* they are talking about *what they saw them do under the conditions in which they usually do it*, rather than making inferences from a more remote indicator such as the answer to a question given in the privacy of a conversation with a stranger. [my emphasis]

“The Epistemology of Qualitative Research”

Howard S. Becker

Issues to Consider: The Site

- Finding an appropriate place to study
 - You want to find a place where the phenomenon of interest happens – strategic or purposive sampling
 - Sooner or later will need to consider access, gatekeepers, key informants
 - At the site, figure out when/where are the best times to observe
 - The preference is normally for fewer strategically chosen sites in more depth

Issues to Consider: Your Role

- Esterberg asks who you are in relation to the site
 - Familiarity = better access, rapport, but also possible conflict of interest, need to break role, hard to see things
 - Unfamiliarity – less rapport but perhaps greater novelty, curiosity, less threat
 - Sometimes see transitions: “Going native”
- Overt vs Covert observer

THE FAR SIDE® By GARY LARSON



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"So, you're a *real* gorilla, are you?
Well, guess you wouldn't mind munchin' down
a few beetle grubs, would you? ... In fact,
we wanna see you chug 'em!"

Observation/Ethnography/Field Research

- Taking in the physical setting
 - How/where to observe
- Developing relationships
 - Importance of creating, maintaining rapport
- Tracking, observing, listening
 - Gather information about “everything”
- Locating subgroups and stars
 - Different perspectives/opinions; opens doors

Observation/Ethnography/Field Research

- Might note but must go beyond superficial attributes – e.g., whether poker players wear sunglasses; whether customers pay cash/charge/debit
- “Culture” is one concept that takes you beyond that

Observation/Ethnography/Field Research

- What does “**culture**” imply?
 - **Community** – Membership. What are the bounds of the community; who is in/out?
 - **Shared rules** – What are the expectations? practices? rituals? traditions?
 - **Socialization** – How is behaviour shaped? rewarded? binged?
 - **Identity** – What does membership mean to them? Prestige? Stigmatization? Belonging?

Observation/Ethnography/Field Research

- The importance of field notes
 - Gather information about “everything”
 - Keep it to behaviour; distinguish notes to self
 - Can use dictaphones, notes
 - Record key words and phrases
 - Make notes about the sequence of events
 - Limit your time in the field
 - Write notes immediately upon leaving field; don't talk to others first

Procedures: General Game Plan

1. Immerse oneself in setting, usually for extended period
2. Participate in a variety of ways
3. Observe while participating
4. Take notes
5. Conduct (in)formal interviews
6. Take more notes (and more and more and more)
7. Analyze notes
8. Write up analysis (Esterberg, p.60)

Analysis

- Straight description is often the beginning point; articulate processes – *how* does “it” (i.e., the phenomenon of interest) happen?
 - Instructions for constructing the machine that will make the phenomenon occur; create the flow chart
- Thinking in terms of typologies – people in setting and their vocabularies. Who are the subgroups that comprise the milieu – the regulars; the socialites; the observers; the reckless; the cautious; etc etc?