Seminar on the Practice of Systematic Qualitative Fieldwork – Part I

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Orientation

- Introduction

- How many folks in the room have conducted qualitative fieldwork of some kind? Taken a course in it? Taught a course in it?
Goals and Overview of the Seminar

- Broaden and sensitize your methodological imaginations with respect to systematic qualitative fieldwork

- Why should we be concerned about being systematic?
  - Facilitates controlling for error and bias
  - Facilitates our understanding of how we know what we know
  - Enhances credibility and usefulness of data with multiple audiences

- My stance: Analytic ethnography and “subtle realism”

- Part I: What is qualitative fieldwork? What is research design in this context?
  - Components, Hallmarks, and Warrants of Qualitative Fieldwork
  - Data Collection: Fieldnotes, Sampling, Participant Observation, Interviews, Trustworthiness and Credibility

- Part II: How can one analyze and write on qualitative field data?
  - Data Analysis: Strategies, Processes, and Software
  - Writing and Presenting Qualitative Fieldwork
The Pyramid of Successful Qualitative Fieldwork

- Data collection via systematic and sustained fieldwork
- Detailed and organized fieldnotes
- Systematic data reduction and analysis
- Empirically and theoretically compelling writing

Each component is necessary, but not sufficient, for the successful accomplishment of the pyramid component.
Characteristics of Qualitative Fieldwork

- Sustained direct observation of people as they go about their everyday lives
- Contextually embedded and socially constructed character of social action
- Emphasis on social process
- Attention to indigenous meanings of the people being studied (*verstehen*)
- Methodologically pragmatic
- Integration of data collection and analysis
- Conscious and reflexive of field relations
Why do qualitative fieldwork?

- **Empirical Warrants**
  - Enables us to learn about social worlds about which very little or less is known
  - Gets at the “how” of social life, which we often miss in so much of social science because we jump to the “why” first
  - Enables revisions of prevailing images about social processes, groups, settings, or policies as they are stereotypically understood

- **Theoretical Warrants**
  - Facilitates multiple ways of theoretical development: discovery, refinement, extension

- **Methodological Warrants**
  - Best at questions revolving around how people make sense of and act in and on their worlds through social interaction
  - Appropriate for questions that are not amenable to methods typically used in social science, such as survey, experimental, or demographic approaches
## Tradeoffs of Qualitative Versus Quantitative Fieldwork

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualitative Field Methods</th>
<th>Quantitative Field Methods</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(participant observation, interviews)</td>
<td>(surveys, experimentation)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Depth</strong></td>
<td><strong>Breadth</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Theoretical and Naturalistic Generalizability</td>
<td>Enumerative Generalizability</td>
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<td>Less Control</td>
<td>More Control</td>
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Importance, Content, Process, and Kinds of Fieldnotes

- Fieldnotes as the primary data source in qualitative fieldwork

- Content
  - Contextual details: place, time, social groups, characteristics of actors, style
  - Interactional details: How did an interaction unfold, who did what and then what happened, who was involved
  - Indigenous meanings: what the informants say, how they say it, vocabularies, quotes
  - Some of this will vary over time
  - The “sin” of glossing

- Process of recording notes:
  - Mental jottings → written jottings → elaborated fieldnotes
    - Written jottings are phrases, words, fragments of quotes that you write down that will jog your memory and help you elaborate into a full fieldnote later
    - For each hour in the field, plan 2-3 hours typing the notes later
    - Important to type elaborated fieldnotes as soon as you can once you’re out of the field

- Kinds of notes:
  - Observational notes: who, what, when, where, how
  - Theoretical/analytic notes
  - Methodological notes
  - Reminders
Qualitative Sampling Strategies

- Random sampling not as useful for qualitative fieldwork as for other kinds of research

- Sampling in qualitative fieldwork is both a priori and interactive (unfolding)

- Key to know how a case (however defined) got into your data

- Initial purposive sampling
  - Begin with ecological mapping of the niches where you expect the phenomena to occur
  - Maximum variation sampling
  - Snowball sampling
  - Opportunistic sampling

- Subsequent purposive sampling
  - Typical cases
  - Extreme or deviant cases
  - Theoretical sampling
What should you sample?

- Sites
- Sampling
- Time
- Actors
- Sociocultural Domains
Core Qualitative Data Collection Techniques: Participant Observation and Interviewing

- These strategies enable you to access multiple kinds of data sources that can then be used for triangulation or to construct contrast and/or contradiction/paradox

- Participant observation enables access, some level of direct experience, and builds in a longitudinal component

- Different strategies of PO: from full to peripheral membership and different role identities (neophyte, buddy researcher, credentialed expert) – the importance of deference and rapport

- Interviewing facilitates focusing on:
  - Talk as data and a resource
  - Voice
  - Finding out what’s important to informants
  - Emotions and feelings of informants

- Different interviewing strategies: from eavesdropping to conversational/interviewing by comment to semi-structured/in-depth to the focus group

- Can use different mixes of interviewing and observation depending upon where you are in data collection

- Other data collection techniques: inspection of physical traces (accretion/erosion), documents, archives, field experiments, and surveys: Importance of recognizing the questions that the methods best enable you to answer
How much field data is enough?

- Depends on the questions you’re asking

- Some potential criteria
  - Saturation
  - The phenomena of interest ends
  - Anthropological vs. sociological senses of this issue

- Other factors
  - Your funding runs out
  - Your dissertation advisor tells you it’s time to get a real job
Enhancing the Trustworthiness and Credibility of Fieldwork

- Prolonged engagement
- Persistent observation
- Triangulation
- Comparative (negative) case analysis
- Referential adequacy
- Peer debriefing
- Member checks
- Naturalistic generalization
- Team ethnography