

Chapter 10

Qualitative Field Research

Topics Appropriate for Field Research

- ▶ Topics that defy simple quantification
- ▶ Attitudes and behaviors best understood in their natural setting
- ▶ Social processes over time

Role: Complete Observer to Complete Participant? How to choose?

- Different situations require different roles for the researcher
- Choice must be guided by ethical and methodological considerations

Special Considerations in Qualitative Field Research

▶ Roles of the Observer

▶ Observer-Researcher

- ▶ Reactivity – the problem of social research subjects potentially reacting to being studied, thus altering their behavior from what it would have normally been

Participant-Researcher

- ▶ Problem: you may affect the social process you're studying

Qualitative Field Research Paradigms

- ▶ Ethnography – a report on social life that focuses on detailed and accurate descriptions rather than explanations.
 - ▶ Example: *Street Corner Society* by William Whyte

- ▶ Grounded Theory – an inductive approach to the study of social life that attempts to generate a theory by constantly comparing observations
- ▶ Example: *Life After Death Row: Exonerees' Search for Community and Identity*

- ▶ Participatory Action Research – an approach to social research in which the people being studied are given control over the purpose and procedures of the research.

Conducting Qualitative Field Research

- ▶ Preparing for the Field
 - ▶ Be familiar with relevant research
 - ▶ Discuss your plans with others in the area
 - ▶ Identify and meet informants (when appropriate)
 - ▶ First impressions are important
 - ▶ Establish rapport (an open and trusting relationship)

Conducting Qualitative Field Research

- ▶ Qualitative Interview – contrasted with survey interviewing, the qualitative interview is based on a set of topics to be discussed in depth rather than based on the use of standardized questions.
 - ▶ **Socially acceptable incompetent**

Recording Observations

- Making full and accurate notes is vital
- Write down during or as soon after
- Write everything down

Strengths and Weaknesses of Qualitative Field Research

- ▶ Strengths of Qualitative Field Research
 - ▶ Effective for studying subtle nuances in attitudes and behaviors and social processes over time
 - ▶ Flexibility
 - ▶ Inexpensive

Strengths and Weaknesses of Qualitative Field Research

- ▶ **Validity**

- ▶ Greater validity than survey and experimental measurements

- ▶ **Reliability**

- ▶ Potential problems with reliability