

Collecting Data: Qualitative Approaches

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will be introduced to field research. You will see different types of field research that involve observing or interacting directly with your subjects. You will also learn how and why researchers use different research methodologies. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Defining Field Research

The work of sociology rarely happens in limited, confined spaces. Sociologists seldom study subjects in their own offices or laboratories. Rather, sociologists go out into the world. They meet subjects where they live, work, and play. **Field research** refers to gathering **primary data** from a natural environment without doing a lab experiment or a survey. To conduct field research, the sociologist must be willing to step into new environments and observe, participate, or experience those worlds. In field work, the sociologists, rather than the subjects, are the ones out of their element. This environment requires a high use of **self and social awareness skills**, as sociologists observe nuanced details of others' behavior. It also builds **problem solving skills**, as data is gathered on others through this keen observation.

The researcher interacts with or observes a person or people and gathers data along the way. The key point in field research is that it takes place in the subject's natural environment, whether it's a coffee shop or village, a homeless shelter or the State House, a hospital, airport, mall, or beach resort.



BIG IDEA

Field research takes the researcher out of the lab and into the environment where the subjects spend their time.

While field research often begins in a specific setting, the study's purpose is to observe specific behaviors in that setting. Field work is optimal for observing how people behave. It is less useful, however, for understanding why they behave that way. You can't really narrow down cause and effect when there are so many variables to be factored into a natural environment.

Many of the data gathered in field research are based not on cause and effect but on correlation. And while field research looks for correlation, its small sample size does not allow for establishing a causal relationship between two variables.

Some sociologists study small groups of people who share an identity in one aspect of their lives. Almost everyone belongs to a group of like-minded people who share an interest or hobby. Scientologists, Nordic folk dancers, or members of a fraternity express a specific part of their identity through their affiliation with a group. Those groups are often of great interest to sociologists.



Think of a time in which you were among a particular group of like-minded people, but not a part of this group. For instance, it could be a time in which you visited a daycare, an assisted living center, or another country. How did this experience build your self and social awareness skill? How has the knowledge from this course changed the way in which you observe groups of people?

IN CONTEXT

Jimmy Buffett, an American musician who built a career from his top-10 song “Margaritaville,” has a following of devoted groupies called Parrotheads. Some of them have taken fandom to the extreme, making Parrothead culture a lifestyle. In 2005, Parrotheads and their subculture caught the attention of researchers John Mihelich and John Papineau. The two saw the way Jimmy Buffett fans collectively created an artificial reality. They wanted to know how fan groups shape culture.

What Mihelich and Papineau found was that Parrotheads, for the most part, do not seek to challenge or even change society, as many sub-groups do. In fact, most Parrotheads live successfully within society, holding upper-level jobs in the corporate world. What they seek is escape from the stress of daily life.

At Jimmy Buffett concerts, Parrotheads engage in a form of role play. They paint their faces and dress for the tropics in grass skirts, Hawaiian leis, and Parrot hats. These fans don’t generally play the part of Parrotheads outside of these concerts; you are not likely to see a lone Parrothead in a bank or library. In that sense, Parrothead culture is less about individualism and more about conformity in a group setting. Being a Parrothead means sharing a specific identity. Parrotheads feel connected to each other: it’s a group identity, not an individual one.

In their study, Mihelich and Papineau quote from a book by sociologist Richard Butsch, who writes, “un-self-conscious acts, if done by many people together, can produce change, even though the change may be unintended” (2000). Many Parrothead fan groups have performed good works in the name of Jimmy Buffett culture, donating to charities and volunteering their services.

However, the authors suggest that what really drives Parrothead culture is commercialism. Jimmy Buffett’s popularity was dying out in the 1980s until being reinvigorated after he signed a sponsorship deal with a beer company. These days, his concert tours alone generate nearly \$30 million a year. Buffett made a lucrative career for himself by partnering with product companies and marketing Margaritaville in the form of T-shirts, restaurants, casinos, and an expansive line of products. Some fans accuse Buffett of selling out, while others admire his financial success. Buffett makes no secret of his commercial exploitations; from the stage, he’s been known to tell his fans, “Just remember, I am spending your money foolishly.”

Mihelich and Papineau gathered much of their information online. Referring to their study as a “Web ethnography,” they collected extensive narrative material from fans who joined Parrothead clubs and

posted their experiences on websites. “We do not claim to have conducted a complete ethnography of Parrothead fans, or even of the Parrothead Web activity,” state the authors, “but we focused on particular aspects of Parrothead practice as revealed through Web research.” Fan narratives gave them insight into how individuals identify with Buffett’s world and how fans used popular music to cultivate personal and collective meaning.

In conducting studies about pockets of culture, most sociologists seek to discover a universal appeal. Mihelich and Papineau stated, “Although Parrotheads are a relative minority of the contemporary US population, an in-depth look at their practice and conditions illuminate [sic] cultural practices and conditions many of us experience and participate in.”

In the remainder of this lesson, we will look at three types of field research: participant observation, ethnography, and the case study.



TERMS TO KNOW

Field Research

The process of gathering data from a natural environment without doing a lab experiment or a survey.

Primary Data

Data that are collected directly from firsthand experience.

2. Participant Observation

In **participant observation** research, a sociologist joins a group of people and participates in a group’s routine activities for the purpose of observing them within that context. This method lets researchers experience a specific aspect of social life. A researcher might go to great lengths to get a firsthand look into a trend, institution, or behavior. Researchers temporarily put themselves into roles and record their observations.

➔ **EXAMPLE** A researcher doing participant observation might work as a waitress in a diner, live on the streets with unhoused people for several weeks, or ride along with police officers as they patrol their regular beat.

One advantage of this method is that the researcher gets to see how people actually act rather than having them tell you how they act. If you asked another person, “Are you homophobic?”, do you think he would admit to being homophobic? Probably not. However, if you actually observed this person’s behavior, in his natural setting once he is comfortable with you, he might do some observable things that divulge he is actually homophobic. This is how the participant observation method is advantageous: because people can’t hide their actions as easily as they can deceive you with their words.

Although these researchers try to blend in seamlessly with the population they study, they are still obligated to obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. In keeping with scholarly objectives, the purpose of their observation is different from simply “people watching” at one’s workplace, on the bus or train, or in a public space.

At the beginning of a field study, researchers might have a question: “What really goes on in the kitchen of the most popular diner on campus?” or “What are the impacts of being unhoused on social connections?” Participant observation is a useful method if the researcher wants to explore a certain environment from the inside.

Field researchers simply want to observe and learn. In such a setting, the researcher will be alert and open minded to whatever happens, recording all observations accurately. Soon, as patterns emerge, questions will become more specific, observations will lead to hypotheses, and hypotheses will guide the researcher in shaping data into results.

Some sociologists prefer not to alert people to their presence. The main advantage of covert participant observation is that it allows the researcher access to authentic, natural behaviors of a group's members. The challenge, however, is gaining access to a setting without disrupting the pattern of others' behavior. Becoming an inside member of a group, organization, or subculture takes time and effort. Researchers must pretend to be something they are not. The process could involve role playing, making contacts, networking, or applying for a job. Whenever deception is involved in sociological research, it will be intensely scrutinized and may or may not be approved by an Institutional Review Board.

Once inside a group, participation observation research can last months or even years. Sociologists have to balance the types of interpersonal relationships that arise from living and/or working with other people with their objectivity as a researcher. They must keep their purpose in mind and apply the sociological perspective. That way, they illuminate social patterns that are often unrecognized.



BIG IDEA

Participant observation means living, working, socializing, or engaging in another activity alongside your subjects, often without their knowledge.

Because information gathered during participant observation is mostly qualitative, rather than quantitative, the end results are often descriptive or qualitative. This type of research is well-suited to learning about the kinds of human behavior or social groups that are not known by the scientific community, for groups who are particularly closed or secretive, or when one is attempting to understand societal structures, as we will see in the following example.

IN CONTEXT

One day over lunch with her editor, the journalist Barbara Ehrenreich mentioned an idea. How can people exist on minimum-wage work? How do low-income workers get by? She said that she thought someone should do a study on this. Her editor suggested that she do it herself.

That's how Ehrenreich found herself joining the ranks of the working class. For several months, she left her comfortable home and lived and worked among people who lacked, for the most part, higher education and marketable job skills. Undercover, she applied for and worked minimum wage jobs as a waitress, a cleaning woman, a nursing home aide, and a retail chain employee. During her participant observation, she used only her income from those jobs to pay for food, clothing, transportation, and shelter.

She discovered the obvious, that it's almost impossible to get by on minimum wage service work. She also experienced and observed attitudes many middle and upper-class people never think about. She witnessed firsthand the treatment of working class employees. She saw the extreme measures people take to make ends meet and to survive. She described fellow employees who held two or three jobs, worked seven days a week, lived in cars, could not pay to treat chronic health conditions, got randomly fired, submitted to drug tests, and moved in and out of homeless shelters. She brought aspects of that life to light, describing difficult working conditions and the poor

treatment that low-wage workers suffer.

Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America the book she wrote upon her return to her real life as a well-paid writer, has been widely read and used in many college classrooms. The first edition was published in 2001 and a follow-up post-recession edition was published with updated information in 2011. Even though Ehrenreich is a journalist and not a sociologist, her work is well regarded by sociologists as well; one doesn't have to be a sociologist to use field research methodologies to effectively research trends in society.



THINK ABOUT IT

If you grew up in poverty or have worked low wage jobs for many years instead of just a few months like Ehrenreich, you might have a different perspective on American poverty than someone who only experienced it temporarily. What are some things that Ehrenreich might have missed? How might her identity as a cisgendered white woman have impacted her experience in low wage jobs?



TERM TO KNOW

Participant Observation

A type of research in which a sociologist joins a group of people and participates in a group's routine activities for the purpose of observing them within that context.

2a. Ethnographic Study

Ethnography is a type of field research that involves the extended observation of the social perspective and cultural values of an entire social setting. Ethnographies involve objective observation of an entire community, and they often involve participant observation as a research method.

British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, who studied the Trobriand Islanders near Papua New Guinea during World War I, was one of the first anthropologists to engage with the communities they studied. Malinowski became known for this new method of **ethnography**, a type of qualitative research in which the researcher immerses themselves in a specific community. This differed from the detached observations that took place from a distance (i.e., “on the verandas” or “armchair anthropology”).

Although anthropologists had been doing ethnographic research longer, sociologists began doing ethnographic research in the 20th century, particularly in what became known as The Chicago School at the University of Chicago. William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum* (1943) is a seminal work of urban ethnography and a classic sociological text.

The heart of an ethnographic study focuses on how subjects view their own social standing and how they understand themselves in relation to a community. An ethnographic study might observe, for example, a small U.S. fishing town, an Inuit community, a village in Thailand, a Buddhist monastery, a private boarding school, or an amusement park. These places all have borders, whether real or imagined. People live, work, study, or vacation within those borders. People are there for a certain reason and therefore behave in certain ways and respect certain cultural norms. An ethnographer would commit to spending a predetermined amount of time studying every aspect of the chosen place, taking in as much as possible.

➔ **EXAMPLE** A sociologist studying a village in the Amazon might watch the way villagers go about their daily lives and then write a paper about it. To observe a spiritual retreat center, an ethnographer might attend as a guest for an extended stay, observe and record data, and collate the material into results.

IN CONTEXT

In 1924, a young married couple named Robert and Helen Lynd undertook an unprecedented ethnography: to apply sociological methods to the study of one U.S. city in order to discover what “ordinary” people in the United States did and believed. Choosing Muncie, Indiana (population about 30,000), as their subject, they moved to the small town and lived there for eighteen months.

Ethnographers had been examining other cultures for decades—groups considered minority or outsider—like gangs, immigrants, and the poor. But no one had studied the so-called average American.

Recording interviews and using surveys to gather data, the Lynds did not sugarcoat or idealize Indiana life. They objectively stated what they observed. Researching existing sources, they compared Muncie in 1890 to the Muncie they observed in 1924. Most Muncie adults, they found, had grown up on farms but now lived in homes inside the city. From that discovery, the Lynds focused their study on the impact of industrialization and urbanization.

They observed that the workers of Muncie were divided into business class and working class groups. They defined business class as dealing with abstract concepts and symbols, while working class people used tools to create concrete objects. The two classes led different lives with different goals and hopes. However, the Lynds observed, mass production offered both classes the same amenities. Like wealthy families, the working class was now able to own radios, cars, washing machines, telephones, vacuum cleaners, and refrigerators. This was a newly emerging economic and material reality of the 1920s.

As the Lynds worked, they divided their manuscript into six sections: “Getting a Living,” “Making a Home,” “Training the Young,” “Using Leisure,” “Engaging in Religious Practices,” and “Engaging in Community Activities.” Each chapter included subsections such as “The Long Arm of the Job” and “Why Do They Work So Hard?” in the “Getting a Living” chapter.

When the study was completed, the Lynds encountered a big problem. The Rockefeller Foundation, which had commissioned the book, claimed it was useless and refused to publish it. The Lynds asked if they could seek a publisher themselves.

As it turned out, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* was not only published in 1929, but also became an instant bestseller, a status unheard of for a sociological study. The book sold out six printings in its first year of publication, and has never gone out of print.

Nothing like it had ever been done before. *Middletown* was reviewed on the front page of the *New York Times*. Readers in the 1920s and 1930s identified with the citizens of Muncie, Indiana, but they were equally fascinated by the sociological methods and the use of scientific data to define ordinary people in the United States. The book was proof that social data were important—and interesting—to the U.S. public.



BRAINSTORM

If a researcher came to your community to do an ethnography, what do you think they would be interested in? Do you think an outsider asking questions would be trusted in your community, or would they need to pretend to fit in?



TERM TO KNOW

Ethnography

A type of qualitative research in which the researcher immerses themselves in a specific community.

3. Case Study

Sometimes a researcher wants to study one specific person or event. A **case study** is an in-depth analysis of a single event, situation, or individual. To conduct a case study, a researcher examines existing sources like documents and archival records, conducts interviews, or engages in direct observation and even participant observation, if possible.

Researchers might use this method to study a single case of, for example, a foster child, cancer patient, serial killer, labor leader, or nurse. However, a major criticism of the case study method is that a developed study of a single case, while offering depth on a topic, does not provide broad enough evidence to form a generalized conclusion. In other words, it is difficult to make universal claims based on just one person, since one person does not verify a pattern. This is why most sociologists do not use case studies as a primary research method.

However, case studies are useful when the single case is unique and there is no other way to study the phenomena. In these instances, a single case study can add tremendous knowledge to a certain discipline. Case studies will incorporate a wide range of methodologies and tend to be longitudinal (a study in which the same case is revisited over time).

➔ **EXAMPLE** In the 90s, Anne Fadiman spent several years getting to know a Hmong immigrant family in California, whose daughter Lia Lee suffered from what Western doctors called epilepsy. However, the girl's doctors had experienced significant challenges in communicating with the Lee family, to the point where the girl was briefly removed from her parents' loving care by the state. Fadiman built strong, trusting relationships with the family and with the girl's doctors, and came to understand that the Western doctors' different cultural attitudes around what we call epilepsy and around authority had made them entirely unable to communicate with the Lees.

Fadiman wrote about Lia Lee's medical history and family life in the 1997 book *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, which is an extended case study on the cross-cultural communication failures of Lia's doctors. The depth and detail of this example make it useful for many, even though it only concerns the experiences of one family.



TERM TO KNOW

Case Study

In-depth analysis of a single event, situation, or individual.

4. Selecting a Research Method

Sociological research is a fairly complex process. As you can see, a lot goes into even a simple research design. There are many steps and much to consider when collecting data on human behavior, as well as in interpreting and analyzing data in order to form conclusive results. Sociologists use scientific methods for good reason. The scientific method provides a system of organization that helps researchers plan and conduct the study while ensuring that data and results are reliable, valid, and objective.

The many methods available to researchers—including experiments, surveys, field studies, and secondary data analysis—all come with advantages and disadvantages. The strength of a study can depend on the choice and implementation of the appropriate method of gathering research. Depending on the topic, a study might use a single method or a combination of methods.

It is important to plan a research design before undertaking a study. The information gathered may in itself be surprising, and the study design should provide a solid framework in which to analyze predicted and unpredicted data.

Advantages and Challenges of Main Sociological Research Methods			
Method	Implementation	Advantages	Challenges
Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questionnaires • Interviews • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yields many responses • Can survey a large sample • Quantitative data are easy to chart 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be time consuming • Can be difficult to encourage participant response. • Captures what people think and believe but not necessarily how they behave in real life.
Field Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observation • Participant observation • Ethnography • Case study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yields detailed, accurate real-life information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time consuming • Data captures how people behave but not what they think and believe • Qualitative data is difficult to organize
Experiment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliberate manipulation of social customs and mores 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tests cause and effect relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hawthorne Effect • Ethical concerns about people's well-being
Secondary Data Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of government data (census, health, crime statistics) • Research of historic documents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes good use of previous sociological information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data could be focused on a purpose other than yours • Data can be hard to find

Choosing a research methodology depends on a number of factors, including the purpose of the research and the audience for whom the research is intended.

IN CONTEXT

If we consider the type of research that might go into producing a government policy document on the effectiveness of safe injection sites for reducing the public health risks of intravenous drug use, we would expect public administrators to want “hard” (i.e., quantitative) evidence of high reliability to help them make a policy decision. The most reliable data would come from an experimental or quasi-experimental research model in which a control group can be compared with an experimental group using quantitative measures.

This approach has been used by researchers studying InSite in Vancouver. InSite is a supervised safe-injection site where heroin addicts and other intravenous drug users can go to inject drugs in a safe, clean environment. Clean needles are provided and health care professionals are on hand to intervene in the case of overdose or other medical emergency. It is a controversial program both because heroin use is against the law (the facility operates through a federal ministerial exemption) and because the heroin users are not obliged to quit using or seek therapy. To assess the effectiveness of the program, researchers compared the risky usage of drugs in populations before and after the opening of the facility and geographically near and distant to the facility. The results from the studies have shown that InSite has reduced both deaths from overdose and risky behaviors, such as the sharing of needles, without increasing the levels of crime associated with drug use and addiction.

On the other hand, if the research question is more exploratory (for example, trying to discern the reasons why individuals in the crack smoking subculture engage in the risky activity of sharing pipes), the more nuanced approach of fieldwork is more appropriate. The research would need to focus on the subcultural context, rituals, and meaning of sharing pipes, and why these phenomena override known health concerns.

Graduate student Andrew Ivsins at the University of Victoria studied the practice of sharing pipes among 13 habitual users of crack cocaine in Victoria, B.C. He met crack smokers in their typical setting downtown and used an unstructured interview method to try to draw out the informal norms that lead to sharing pipes. One factor he discovered was the bond that formed between friends or intimate partners when they shared a pipe. He also discovered that there was an elaborate subcultural etiquette of pipe use that revolved around the benefit of getting the crack resin smokers left behind. Both of these motives tended to outweigh the recognized health risks of sharing pipes (such as hepatitis) in the decision making of the users. This type of research was valuable in illuminating the unknown subcultural norms of crack use that could still come into play in a harm reduction strategy, such as distributing safe crack kits to addicts.



BIG IDEA

A researcher chooses a research method based on the question they are asking and the population they are studying. Sometimes it makes sense to combine methods, or to switch methods after some initial data have been collected. All the different methodologies we have discussed in this unit are useful for different purposes.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned to **define field research** You were introduced to **participant observation**

and one specific type called an **ethnographic study**. You saw how researchers use **case studies** to examine events or individual phenomena. In the end, you learned how researchers go about **selecting a research method** for their work.

Best of luck in your learning!

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REFERENCES Butsch, R. (2008). *The citizen audience: Crowds, publics, and individuals*. Routledge.



TERMS TO KNOW

Case-Study

In-depth analysis of a single event, situation, or individual.

Ethnography

A type of qualitative research in which the researcher immerses themselves in a specific community.

Field Research

The process of gathering data from a natural environment without doing a lab experiment or a survey.

Participant Observation

A type of research in which a sociologist joins a group of people and participates in a group's routine activities for the purpose of observing them within that context.

Primary Data

Data that are collected directly from firsthand experience.