Level 2: participant observation

Participant observation, according to Adler and Adler (1994:378), 'enjoys the advantage of drawing the observer into the phenomenological complexity of the world, where connections, correlations, and causes can be witnessed as and how they unfold'. (...)

basic checklist of considerations that will facilitate effective field relationships:

Box 3.5 Access and relationships: some considerations

1. Make use of contacts.
2. Assess the interests of all gatekeepers.
3. Take care when representing your research.
4. Assess perceived relationships with different groups.
5. Be sensitive to your own views and the development of these.
6. Don't 'go native'.

As a final reminder of perceptual shadings, Extract 3.8 offers a glimpse of how the Pen teachers saw me, based on the descriptions offered to visitors or new staff.

Extract 3.8 The Pen School 5: representing the researcher

I began data collection in January and by the summer I was referred to as 'one of us', but with additional labels attached. I was never described explicitly as a 'teacher' but rather as 'our researcher' and on one occasion as 'our tame academic'. My role always demanded some explanation when visitors were introduced and recordings of staffroom exchanges more than a year into the research revealed different views of my role. For Harry I was 'doing research about how teachers operate', while Paul was keen to point to a focus on experienced teachers and 'how they cooperate with each other'. Only three weeks before the end of my stay Jenny, the principal, explained to a visitor that 'Keith's been attached to us . . . Keith's researching us' and that my subject was 'how a quality organisation operates' – thus demonstrating how the representation of research and the researcher can be used as a resource for different ends.

A structure for observations

Observation in itself can be infinitely fascinating, but the focus in this section is on the more extended and demanding process of data collection, where allowance must be made for the weight of imposition that commitment brings. Fieldwork, done properly, is a mixture of intense

excitement and 'rigorous, time-consuming, and often boring, tedious work' (Berg 1998:129). The researcher must be prepared for both.

Karp (1980:93), in a fascinating paper on observation in Times Square, places observation in its proper perspective as a data gathering tool: 'Researchers who develop and eye for detail in observing settings can collect an enormous wealth of data'. However, the data need to be captured systematically, and in order to do this the eye and mind must be trained so that it will be possible to follow standard procedures while at the same time holding on to an openness of viewpoint that snatches the unexpected and unguarded moment. It's a tall order.

The best starting point is to select a setting for frequent and systematic observation and then return to this again and again as you hone your skills. Level 1 includes suggestions on how to choose a setting and begin observation, but if you already have a project in mind it would make sense to choose a setting relevant to this. Once you have done that, try to work up a description using the elements described below, then explore the strategies for observation in the next section. Don't worry too much about note-taking at this stage, but when you are confident that your observational skills are sufficiently honed, address the issues of note-taking in the final section which deals with practical issues.

The most widely known checklist of things to consider is provided by Spradley (1980), who identifies space, actors, activity, object, act, event, time, goal and setting as key elements. Numerous writers have drawn on this and the structure proposed in Box 3.6, although different, owes much to Spradley's original system.

Box 3.6 Key features for observation

Setting	space objects	**Systems**	formal informal
People	actors relationships interactions feelings	**Behaviour**	times routines processes events

1. Setting

Level 1 focused on the setting and its inhabitants, but observation at this level will be more fine-grained. The importance of the setting is

obvious enough – staffroom interaction will be different from meetings in the principal's office and encounters in the corridor – but for observation purposes we also need to look closely at aspects of this as it bears on other features such as relationships and status. I have selected two features that can be considered separately, even though they are connected.

1.1 Space: it's always a good idea to draw a sketch of your chosen setting and use this as a basis for exploring the relationship between actions and setting. Ask questions such as the following: What space is available and how is it distributed? (*Distribution*) Are there distinct territories? Who inhabits them, who are the visitors and who is excluded? What are the rules relating to them? (*Territories*) Are particular activities related to particular spaces? Which spaces encourage particular activities and which spaces discourage them? How do people make use of the setting in their everyday activities? (*Activities*) Are there any spaces or rules relating to spaces that allow people to define themselves or their actions (e.g. Jo sitting at the resources desk means 'I'm being the co-ordinator')? (*Rôles*)

1.2 Objects: the same sorts of questions can be asked of objects. Ownership of or access to particular objects might be a sign of status, certain objects might be associated with particular activities, and so on.

2. Systems

I've separated this out from routines (see below) because systems, whether formal or informal, are explicit and can be dealt with quite straightforwardly. If there are systems in operation, it's important to find out what they are so that you can observe how people orient to them. It's also worth distinguishing formal systems which participants are constrained to follow (although *how* they follow them is interesting in itself), from informal systems that are socially but not formally binding. What I have in mind here is the difference between, for example, a formal system for recording materials taken from the staffroom, and an informal system for making sure that such materials are distributed fairly. You might like to reflect for a moment on the systems that apply in your own staffroom, then spend a break watching how different people fit in with them.

3. People

It goes without saying that people are the objects of your observation, but to refer to them as 'objects' is clearly inappropriate, and the real challenge before you is to find ways of describing them and their

behaviour which will help you to understand their world. To this end, four particular aspects deserve attention.

3.1 Actors: these are the people themselves. Who are the actors? What are their names? How are they addressed? What do you know of their history? How do they present themselves?

3.2 Relationships: it's important to pin these down. What are the groups? How do they relate to one another? Are there hierarchies? How do people move from one group to another? How are relationships defined?

3.3 Interactions: the relationship between this and the former category is an intimate one, since it is through interaction that such relationships are established and developed. It is possible to capture interactions in fieldnotes, but there are obvious advantages in using recorded data, which may reflect subtle alignments not immediately apparent to the observer.

3.4 Feelings: the final element is feelings. Obviously, the observer has no direct access to these, but it's important to record actors' feelings as manifested in their behaviour or talk.

4. Behaviour

A sense of this usually emerges over time, and there's a real danger of jumping to premature conclusions about what is going on and what labels might be attached to this. The explanation of particular classroom activities, for example, will be found in the relationship between teacher and class, established over time and constantly evolving. Behaviour is something that needs to be observed carefully and though its description is neither straightforward nor definitive, there are particular aspects (outlined below) that can guide observation.

4.1 Times: noting the timing of activities is very important. What takes place unexceptionally at the beginning of a lesson or break, for example, may be more significant if introduced at the end. Times provide a convenient set of co-ordinates for locating activities. Remember, though, that these are not cut-off points: the 'beginning' of a lesson is not necessarily 9 am, or the point at which the teacher enters the room; some lessons may 'begin', in a significant sense, in the corridor or even the staffroom. For example, if the principal makes a comment in the staffroom to a teacher about the class the latter is about to take, this might send the teacher into the classroom in an angry or very cheerful mood.

4.2 Routines: routines provide a useful way of orienting to behaviour in a particular setting. In all but the most temporary of contexts, routines quickly become established, some of them idiosyncratic and others shared by a number of actors. Unlike systems, they are not formally established, but they are none the less powerful for that. It can be very instructive to identify such routines in order to discover what they represent, and if routines are broken the results can provide valuable insights into relationships, shared understandings and social organisation.

4.3 Processes: these are harder to pin down but need to be distinguished from routines because the order of acts is less rigid. It can be useful, to note what processes (interactional, professional, and so on) need to be gone through in order to achieve certain goals, and it may be possible to identify common processes, or shared characteristics of different processes, as part of building up a picture of a particular world.

4.4 Events: Spradley (1980) distinguishes *acts* (single actions), *activities* (sets of related acts), and *events* (sets of related activities), but I've opted for only the highest level. It can be very helpful to identify specific events and the characteristics of these, because this may make it easier to distinguish patterns and norms. I don't think it matters too much *how* you choose to identify events, so long as you develop a fairly consistent approach to this. It's also interesting to note that as observation progresses, events become 'richer', their roots and ramifications more obviously extensive. This is both encouraging and rewarding.

Strategies for observing

Having a structure for observations and following the advice offered in Level 1 will provide you with a solid grounding for observation activities, but there are particular strategies that will hone your skills and open up the possibility for discoveries and insights that might otherwise elude you. In this section I divide these into general strategies and orienting strategies, though this does not imply a hierarchy – the best advice is to regard them all as options but go with what works for you.

General strategies

The best advice I know is offered by Wolcott (1994:161–4), who recommends four strategies for ethnographic observation. They are not meant to be exhaustive, but they deserve serious consideration. You might find some or all of them valuable in your own development as an observer.

Strategy 1: observe and record everything. Wolcott recommends this as a useful starting point and argues that it leads to two useful realisations:

1. Because you can't observe everything, you're likely to be struck by the evidence of what you do actually record.
2. This selection can provide valuable clues to your own observing habits. You may find that you need to expand your gaze, that you focus on some things at the expense of others, and so on.

He also points out that 'a broad look around' can itself be valuable and may be appreciated by readers. A sense of place is very important and I always try to get a good feel for the setting before turning my attention to what's happening there. It can also be interesting to compare impressions at the beginning of data gathering with those occurring when the setting has become a familiar one.

Strategy 2: observe and look for nothing – that is, nothing in particular. The advantage of looking for nothing in particular, of treating a setting as 'flat', is that certain elements may then stand out, like 'bumps'. This strategy can be particularly valuable in very complex situations where too much is happening for the observer absorb at once, or excessively familiar ones. Wolcott offers the classroom as a typical example of the latter, and says that it can be useful to treat a lesson as 'business as usual', keeping an antenna out for anything that disturbs this. For example, student interruptions might break into the orderly flow of things and provide a focus for attention.

Strategy 3: look for paradoxes. This strategy offers a means of focusing observation and can be particularly useful in educational contexts, where paradoxes and contradictions are common. Wolcott (1994:163) quotes the example of the 'paradox between the frequently heard opinion that it is hard to get teachers to try new things and the teacher-expressed belief that teachers have insufficient opportunity to show what they already are capable of doing'.

Strategy 4: identify the key problem confronting a group. Wolcott suggests that sometimes a group is presented with a particular problem and that this can provide a useful focus for observation. He offers an example of education administrators whose main problem is conducting teacher evaluation. In my own research, most staffroom stories centred on the problem of dealing with specifically interactional challenges in class (for example, the quiet student), and identifying this provided a valuable focus for my observation of such stories and the analysis which followed (Richards 1999b).

Orienting Strategies

In addition to these general strategies, there are also particular means of orienting in a new way to what is observed. Whether or not these particular strategies are used will depend on the situation, but it's certainly worth knowing about them. Here are three that you might find useful:

What if? As observers, we invest all our attention in what is happening, but it can sometimes be valuable to stand back and ask hypothetical questions. Lofland and Lofland (1984) provide a list of possible questions that includes examples such as the following: Why doesn't X happen? What would happen if X happened?

Maps. Whyte (1984:86) mentions watching and noting in map form the movements of the people in a club he was observing. He built up a large collection of such maps and the information they provided enabled him to form a clear picture of the relationship between movement and interaction so that eventually when an issue arose he could predict who would stand where.

Spot the leader. This simple approach, also developed by Whyte (1997:22), was based on a distinction between *pair events* (involving two people) and *set events* involving three or more. In the latter, the person who initiates a change in interaction is the leader and over time a stable pattern emerges that the researcher can use to work out groupings and their ranking structure. Case 3.1 on p. 117 illustrated this approach.

Note-taking

Fieldnotes are all things to all people. Dip into the relatively limited literature of note-taking and you'll find plenty of confident statements about what fieldnotes should be, but few of these will make happy partners. Here are a couple of uncomfortable bedfellows:

> After reading ethnographers' full field notes, it should be possible for a person to visualise exactly what the ethnographers saw and heard during the field session. (Berg 1998:150)
>
> [Fieldnotes are] something that can't readily be comprehended by another person. (Jackson 1990:20)

What are we to make of this? I see it as an affirmation of the importance of the individual researcher in the research process. The challenge and glowing reward of fieldwork is to come to know yourself honestly enough to discover with equal honesty the ways of others, and the process of

recording is the balance by means of which this relationship can be weighed. Whatever else they might be, fieldnotes are one person's version of their encounter with the world:

> [F]ieldnotes are an expression of the ethnographer's deepening local knowledge, emerging sensitivities and evolving substantive concerns and theoretical insights. (Emerson *et al.* 2001:355)

There are no rules that will enable us to fashion this expression, and we must be aware of the mutability and the limitations of what we are about. We need to recognise, for example, that the act of writing itself imposes shape and substance; in Atkinson's (1992:6) words, 'What may be generated as "data" is affected by what the ethnographer can treat as "writable" and "readable"'. Within the broader context of such limitations, I now explore the practical issues involved in note-taking, but first wish to underline the importance of good practice (Sánchez-Janowski 2002:148): *It matters very much how notes are taken*.

Procedure

Procedures for note-taking may change as the project develops, but a useful general distinction is that proposed by Wolfinger (2002) between approaches to note-taking based on a *salience hierarchy*, in which the observer begins with what is most interesting, noteworthy or telling, and those aiming for *comprehensive note-taking*, an approach that would draw on the categories identified above. Whatever the particular approach, there are certain basic considerations that are fundamental to the production of accurate notes:

1. *Limit exposure to field*: serious observation is exhausting anyway, and the longer spent in the field, the longer the time needed at the desk afterwards. Berg (1998:147) suggests a 1:4 ratio of field: writing up, which is probably not a bad guide, but much depends on the nature of the setting (for example, a change of settings will involve a lot of description), degree of movement and interaction (for example, the staffroom when everyone is quietly reading will demand less than a break busy with talk and action), style of note-taking (narrative takes longer than jottings), typing speed of the researcher, and so on.

2. *Minimise the gap between field and note-taking*: the advantages of this are obvious and some researchers recommend trying to avoid becoming involved in conversation between leaving the field and settling down at the desk.

3. Train your memory: again, the benefits are clear, but I prefer to interpret this more broadly than simply improving recall: 'Knowing what to record comes from experimenting with one's memory' (Delamont 2002:138).

4. Jot down notes, key words and phrases: a small pocket notebook and pencil are very useful, provided that the notes can be made in secret; otherwise it's best to exploit any blank space on a convenient document in order to remain unobtrusive (which is a good reason to keep a pencil handy).

5. Seize opportunities in the field: a few moments alone, when engaged in an activity that involves writing anyway, even a visit to the lavatory (Whyte, 1984:86), can provide valuable moments.

This list embraces the three sorts of notes identified by Lofland and Lofland (1995:89–97): mental notes, jotted notes and full fieldnotes. In the case of the Pen I was lucky because I could disguise my notes as lesson planning, writing headings that referred to the latter and a text that captured what was happening in the staffroom around me (Richards 1997b). Ideally, I should have liked to keep all my notes and findings to myself, but it was important to balance the importance of not influencing the nature of staffroom interaction against the need to become a trusted member of staff. I soon discovered that this was a fairly open environment and decided that strategic openness on my part would offer an acceptable compromise. Although my note-taking was covert, I would occasionally make a comment about an idiosyncratic aspect of someone's behaviour or interactional style. The teachers seemed to enjoy this and I was careful to release only details that would not bear on any analysis I was likely to undertake.

Form of fieldnotes

Up to this point I've discussed fieldnotes as though it is sufficient simply to register in writing what is observed, in so far as this is possible, but fieldnotes can take different forms. The difference between notes in the field and written up versions is obvious enough, but analytical and relational issues also need to be taken into account. The former make it necessary to include what are usually called memos, pointing to analytical insights, possible connection with theory, methodological points, and so on. Relational issues are those that connect the researcher with the whole process of research and with actors and these will involve personal reflections and resonances.

While some researchers are happy to integrate memos with the fieldnotes themselves, many recommend that they are kept separate. In the

Pen project I began with the former approach but soon decided to write up my notes in two columns, the main one for description only and a thinner column to the right for memos. Perhaps unsurprisingly, when I introduced these two columns in my own notes, I found that the temptation to fill the 'comments' column more than doubled the space taken up by this element – an interesting reminder that not even the form notes take is analytically neutral.

When considering how your notes will be represented (columns, file cards, computer files), it's also a good idea to develop a coding system that will enable you to cross reference efficiently (see Box 3.7). However notes are stored, though, Delamont's advice (2002:67), to keep analytical notes out of the field, is wise counsel – in the wrong hands they could easily lead to distress or conflict.

An essential part of any fieldwork is the research diary. This is much more than a mere record of daily activities. It is an opportunity to reflect on all aspects of the research process and your place within it. Because no one need ever see the contents of your diary, it can also serve as a means of letting off steam or venting spleen. If your project is likely to continue beyond a year, I recommend a narrow-line page-a-day A4 diary divided into two columns, the first taking up two-thirds of the width of the page and used for the first year's entries. In the second year, entries can then be made in the narrower column (preferably in a different ink), next to the previous year's comments, which can be read and reflected upon. This process can generate interesting insights and serve as an encouraging reminder of progress made.

Box 3.7 Different forms of fieldnotes

	Notes	*Memos*	*Diaries*	*Texts*
Purpose:	Data	Analysis	Reflection	Representation
Site:	Field	Desk	Drawer	'Podium'
Status:	Core	Supplementary	Personal	Public

The notes that most people will see are the final version and here, too, there are choices to be made but no simple formula for delivering a finished text. How much, in any case, should fieldnotes be edited and polished? How literary should they be? What place is there for dialogue, contrast, tension? Will there be a place for visual evidence (see Banks 2001 for an excellent introduction to this)? QI offers no answers, only the prospect of further discovery. Box 3.8 represents what I take to be, broadly speak-

ing, two different ways in which authors articulate differences of approach. Like so much else in QI, they are not necessarily exclusive and they are certainly not exhaustive, but they are steps towards representing understanding.

Box 3.8 Approaches to writing up fieldnotes

Emerson *et al.* (1995:60–3)	*Real time* (from the perspective at the time, knowledge is incomplete)	*End point* (writer has relatively full knowledge)
Emerson *et al.* (1995:60–3)	*Sketch* (impressionistic representation using detailed imagery)	*Episode* (focus on action evolving over time)
Abrams* (1988)	*First person* (involved insider, limited view)	*Third person* (detached outsider, omniscient view)
van Maanen (1988)	*Confessional tales*	*Realist tales*
Atkinson (1992a)	*Transcriptions* (actors' own words)	*Inscriptions* (written accounts by the observer)

*Quoted in Emerson *et al.* 1995

Ethics

Good QI discovers things about people they didn't know themselves and might not want others to know. It can hurt; a lot; and for a long time. This means that no researcher should ever duck ethical issues. Some academic communities have ethical committees that help in the decision-making process, but there is no licence on earth that takes away the personal responsibility each of us carries:

> It is the responsibility of the ethnographer to try to act in ways that are ethically acceptable, taking due account of his or her goals, the situation in which the research is being carried out, and the values and interests of the people involved. (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:285)

What follows is no more than a thumbnail sketch of the territory. If you would like to know more, de Laine (2000) offers a broad and balanced discussion, but the ultimate arbiter of what is right and decent is your own conscience.

Consent

Some of the issues here were discussed in the context of gaining entry to the field. It is the researcher's responsibility to decide – or discover – where consent for entry, observation, action, and so on, is required and to ensure that it is properly obtained from all concerned parties on the basis of honest representation. The ethical issues here centre on the relevance and limits of consent, and on representation. When is consent needed? How far does it extend? Has it been freely given, or was there an element of coercion?

Honesty

A condition of informed consent is honest representation, but no representation is ever complete, so how much is enough, and who should be told what? If the information given compromises the research then the project has failed before it begins, but how far should the researcher be prepared to reveal their aims? The ethical issue here is the fine dividing line between limited description and deliberate deception.

Privacy

I mentioned in Level 1 that 'public' places may nevertheless carry with them the idea that some actions count as prying; the same applies to places to which we have been given access. Are there assumed/understood/agreed limits on what we might legitimately do there in terms of observation and recording, and are there particular acts which count as private? It's important for the researcher to keep these things in mind and not to assume that the matter of privacy is closed once permission is obtained.

Ownership

Considerations such as those above shade into issues of ownership. To what extent does the data 'belong' to the researcher? The degree of control (for example, with regard to editing, restrictions on access, release) to be exercised by those involved in the research needs to be carefully considered and negotiated. There are no guidelines on acceptable procedures here, but all decisions should be based on respect for the other parties involved and a recognition of the importance of their voice.

Harm

If all the above issues are properly dealt with, the chances of harm are small, but the researcher should always be aware of these and careful not to be the inadvertent cause of harm to others. There is a sense in which research is not a natural thing, at least in as much as the

researcher has to 'make strange' the events that occur; and the outcomes, which cast a penetrating light on ordinary events, have the power to hurt. The researcher needs to be aware of this.

Conclusion

Like so many things that anyone can do, observation makes its demands on the researcher in subtle but pervasive ways, demanding a level of sensitivity that can be exhausting. Nobody properly engages in participant observation without learning more about themselves as a person as well as a researcher, and once skills of observation have been developed the world never looks quite the same again. It's been a long time since I sat in an airport lounge or on a train platform and simply read a book – and life gets richer by the day.