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Writing small discoveries: an exploration of fresh observers' observations

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ABSTRACT Taking field notes (or otherwise documenting observation) is at the very core of ethnographic research. However, relatively speaking, this task has hardly been covered in the research methods literature. With this as a point of departure, this article draws on an analysis of 247 short field notes taken in various situations by student observers. It aims to explore the immediate act of taking field notes while doing observation. By inductive analysis, 10 different 'modes' of observation are drawn from the field notes. This analysis demonstrates on one hand that fresh observers are capable of quickly grasping important aspects of observed interaction and on the other hand that principles of field note taking and researcher positioning need to be addressed further.

KEYWORDS: *field notes, interpretation, observation studies, student observer*

For a highly elaborated and skilled process of 'making notes', peculiar to this particular science, besides its obvious utility in recording observations which could otherwise be forgotten, is, in sociology, actually an instrument of discovery. This process serves a similar purpose in the study of social institutions, to the blow-pipe and the test-tube in chemistry, or the prism and the electro-scope in physics. (Webb and Webb, 1932: 83)

The problems and potential of observation studies

During several years of sociological research in health-related organizations it has been gratifying to experience that practitioners in these settings are generally open to researchers doing ethnographic studies of their own practice. However, students and researchers have often been reluctant to initialize observation studies for several reasons. The first is the risk of being turned down because of the substantial need for researcher presence. The second is the risk of not being able to cope with spending so much time close together with the objects of one's study, and, third, the fear of ending up with piles of

data that one might not be able to analyse in a way that would make sense within a social scientific discourse.

Additionally, some of the methodology texts about observation studies may not reassure potential observers. For instance, in probably one of the first textbooks on field methods, Junker (1960) draws a fairly ambitious outline of how to observe and make field notes. First, he defines observing as 'collecting information-in-society firsthand by maintaining alert attention, with maximum use of the observer's complement of perceptual abilities and sensitivities, to all the accessible and relevant interpersonal and intrapersonal events going on in the immediate field situation through a period of time'. Second, he defines recording as:

writing an account of the observations that clearly discriminates between (a) what the fieldworker believes to be a full and fair account of his observations in the situation (including full quotations verbatim as they occurred in interviews or other interactions), and (b) what he now finds, at the moment of recording (preferably as soon as possible after making the observations), worth adding in the way of personal reflections and research interpretations (such things as comments on how the recorded observations, as 'frozen percepts', may relate to the sought-for knowledge about society: the 'fluid concepts' that accompany learning a social science or developing it on its frontiers). (Junker, 1960: 14)

Hence, observation as method makes substantial demands on the researcher and may be one of the most difficult forms of inquiry to apply to one's own environment. In everyday life we take for granted, hence rendering invisible, the very things that would be relevant to the observer. Moreover, discomfort, uncomfortable ethical dilemmas and even danger, the difficulty of managing a relatively unobtrusive role, and the challenge to identify the 'big picture' while finely observing huge amounts of fast-moving and complex behaviour are just a few of the challenges (Marshall and Rossman, 1995: 80). These demands, as well as economic constraints on researcher time, have probably limited the use of participant observation in sociology. As noted by Dingwall (1997: 52), the 'dominant kind of qualitative study appears to be one in which the investigator carries out a bunch of semi-structured interviews which are then taped and transcribed'. Through such interviews, the researcher often gains a first insight into the constructed realities that are wrapped up in the jargon of the respondent. Through observations, however, the researcher gains a partially independent view of the experience on which the respondent's language has constructed those realities (Erlandson et al., 1993: 99). Hence, interviews and observation are interactive. The interview provides leads for the researcher's observations, while observations suggest probes for interviews. More generally, observation is valuable as an alternate source of data for enhancing cross-checking or triangulation against information gathered through other means (Adler and Adler, 1994).

When supervising Master and PhD candidates in this situation, I have suggested that students doing their thesis research would be better able to cope

with the situation by relying on their own knowledge, experience, intuition and analytical capabilities. This advice is based very much on my own experience. The difficulties include how to make field notes, what to note and, implicitly, what to observe. In this article on doing observation studies, I want to discuss the question of what to observe, and what to note. I draw on a number of short field notes taken by students on research methods courses from 1998 to 2002 (see Table 1) that demonstrate the ways in which inexperienced student researchers approach the task of doing observation studies. The continuum between naive observation and interpretative readings has turned out to be especially interesting, as many students place their observations rather more on the interpretive than on the naive end of the scale.

Literature about observation practices

Within the qualitative research methods literature, much has been written on the importance of learning how to do semi-structured interviews, and comparatively little attention has been given to the 'fine art of observation' (Erlandson et al., 1993: 98). In particular, not much has been written about the role of intuition in ethnographic study and how to make good observation and take productive field notes. Academic journals that are concerned with methodological issues within qualitative research, such as *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Qualitative Research*, *Field Methods*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* and *Qualitative Health Research*, have only slightly touched these problems.¹ The articles that represent notable exceptions have focused on the need for intuition and creativity in qualitative research (Janesick, 2001), as well as the problem of intuition, or 'being a natural', as an excuse for sloppy preparation (Morse, 2002). Peshkin (2001) discusses the need for various 'lenses', i.e. topics to focus on, or sensitizing concepts, to enhance the researcher's perception in observation studies. Lapadat and Lindsay (1999) address the interpretive aspect of transcription from audio or videotapes and recommend a higher transparency between field recordings and transcribed text. In the only journal article that focuses especially on interpretative aspects of field notes, Wolfinger (2002) applies Emerson et al.'s (1995) two field note strategies to discuss how different data may be produced depending on an ethnographer's tacit knowledge and beliefs.

Although textbooks for research methods are numerous, the problem of implicit interpretation in field notes is remarkably absent in this part of the literature too. In general, textbooks seem to focus on the technical aspects such as gaining entry, locating guides, contact persons or gatekeepers, taking field notes (when, where, how to use recording devices, how to take notes), and disengaging with the field. However, in spite of a concern with technicalities in many textbooks, some authors deal with the problem of observing and reporting in relation to interpretation. Various authors discuss this problem as answers to two closely related questions: what to observe? and how to make

field notes? Let me briefly outline how these questions have been addressed in the literature.

WHAT TO OBSERVE?

For many students approaching observation studies, one of the first questions they confront is that of what to look for. Many methodology textbooks start out with a general rule about this, such as advice to 'enter the field with complete openness' (Glaser, 1978) and 'gather data in a manner that presents the most complete picture of what has happened in the research setting' (Erlandson et al., 1993). They often then continue with more detailed descriptions. Denzin (1989) suggests that observation should describe participants, interactions, routines, rituals, temporal elements, interpretations and social organizations. More elaborately, Corbetta (2003: 246) suggests observation of (1) the physical setting, (2) the participants and their roles and tasks, (3) formal interactions, (4) informal interactions, and (5) the social actors' own interpretations (by informal conversation and formal interviews). Merriam (1988) adds (6) frequency and durations, as well as (7) subtle factors such as unplanned activities, symbolic and connotative meanings of words, non-verbal communication, and what does not happen – especially if it ought to have happened. Runcie (1980) is also concerned with (8) behaviour cycles, and the duration and frequency of certain acts, as well as (9) stage/period/phase (e.g. lunchtime) in which this behaviour occurs within the setting, and (10) stage/period/phase in which the setting itself is placed (for example, term time at university).

Erlandson et al. (1993: 103) have a slightly different approach, putting emphasis on the use of 'critical incidents' as targets for observation. In an early stage, an observer cannot really tell whether an observed event should be considered a normal event (i.e. one that exemplifies what is central to the social context) or one in sharp contrast to it (i.e. one that identifies the boundaries of the context). The critical incidents should be recorded in as specific as possible *descriptive* terms. A critical incident should contain only one event or chief description; it should identify persons, locations and times as specifically as possible; it should either be observed by the writer or be verifiable by more than one source; and it should help define the operation of the organization by focusing on either a typical event or one that is distinctively atypical (Erlandson et al., 1993). Accordingly, the skilled observer must have knowledge of what is typical and atypical in the setting, and 'by virtue of his competence' select and record only what is significant (Junker, 1960: 67), with the intent to reduce information that is not relevant for the research purpose.

To discuss the problem of significance, Wolfinger (2002) applies Emerson et al.'s (1995) two field note strategies to discuss how different data may be produced depending on an ethnographer's tacit knowledge and beliefs. In the *salience hierarchy* strategy, it is the salience of each particular observation that brings it into the field notes. What makes an observation salient is highly

subjective and depends upon the particular research context. Deviant cases often lead to salient data, and may be perceived as deviant because they strike researchers as deviant either from their tacit expectations or with respect to other cases observed (Wolfinger, 2002: 89). In the other strategy, *comprehensive note-taking*, everything that happens during a period of time is systematically and comprehensively described (Emerson et al., 1995). Within this strategy, a researcher will often describe events (and non-events as well) that might otherwise seem too mundane to annotate, hence producing data that may provide the contrasts that allow an identification of deviant cases (Wolfinger, 2002: 91).

The question of what to observe is easy to answer on a technical theoretical level – for example, by listing various topics of observation, as outlined earlier. However, because of constraints in any observer's ability to observe, a more or less tacit 'significance filter' is applied, by which some events in a setting are noted while others are not. The next question is concerned with making field notes.

HOW TO MAKE FIELD NOTES?

Brandt (1972: 80–94) suggests four types of observational notes: anecdotal (critical incidents), specimen records (over time recording of place/persons), field notes (less structured) and ecological descriptions (details of the environment). However, the term field note has come to cover all kinds of note-taking from observation studies. Because of the centrality of these notes, the concern with making good field notes is important in observation studies. Coffey (1996: 66) notes that field notes are 'encoded with the author's conscience, understandings and interpretations', and that the fieldworker is not only an observer, but 'an actor, author, teller and writer'. How to select which incidents to record, which conversations to note or copy down verbatim, and work out themes and ideas will differ from what those studied probably considered important and significant (Coffey, 1996: 64). This touches on an ethical question of how to represent the actors studied (de Laine, 2000) and does also put the note-making task at centre stage of ethnographic work. Junker (1960) refers to Radcliffe-Brown to point out that the fieldworker's accumulation of 'multitudinous impressions' over and beyond what he records may well serve as his 'surest guides in his interpretation of the meanings and customs and beliefs that, alien to his audience, remain impenetrably strange and inexplicable even to those who may be experts but who have not encountered the phenomena in question firsthand' (Junker, 1960: 17).

Textbooks more or less agree on the convention to both record 'what you "know" has happened and what you "think" has happened' (Babbie, 1995: 291) and to make sure that these latter notes, ethnography-originated entries on 'preconceived opinions, and general feelings about certain observed situations' (Berg, 1998: 146) are bracketed and identified to not mix them with actual observations. The ethnographer's ideas and reactions need to be kept

'distinct from, but still related to' the descriptions of what happens in the field (Bouma, 2000: 183). These descriptions are referred to as 'substantive field notes' (Burgess, 1984) or 'running descriptions' (Lofland, 1971: 105–7) of events, people, things heard and overheard, conversations among people, conversations with people and physical settings. In these descriptions, the ethnographer needs to be responsive to the concerns of the observed actors and produce notes in ways that 'capture and preserve indigenous meanings' (Emerson et al., 1995: 12) – for example, by reproducing dialogues as close to verbatim as possible (Berg, 1998: 146). Such 'situated vocabularies' may provide valuable information about the ways in which the observed actors organize their perceptions of the world (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 182–3). On some occasions, when the researcher is getting to know the field, he may also design field note forms, maps, or diagrams to describe interaction in a limited physical space (Humphreys, 1975).

But still, even the most 'objective' running description will necessarily be influenced by the observer's culturally slanted representation, and subjective comprehension needs to be emphasized (Corbetta, 2003: 250). Additional field notes are therefore required that may include previously forgotten, now recalled, events, analytic ideas and inferences, personal impressions and feelings, as well as notes for further information, or observational questions (Lofland, 1971: 105–7). The latter group of notes is referred to as observer comments (Rossman and Rallis, 1998: 137), field diaries (Creswell, 1994: 166) or methodological and analytic field notes (Burgess, 1984). A field diary, with the researcher's interpretations, reflections and reactions, may help the researcher pick out possible distortions generated by the researcher's emotions (Corbetta, 2003: 251). According to Mason (1996), such notes should include six indices of 'subjective adequacy' to enhance the understanding of the researcher and thereby the validity of the research: time (spent with the group), place, social circumstances, language (familiarity with language), intimacy (personal involvement with the group) and social consensus (how meanings within the culture are employed and shared). An additional point made by Johnson (1975) is that, as researchers enter the research field, their private fears, apprehensions, feelings of ignorance, confusion and incompetence impact upon the thought processes, including the ability to collect and analyse data accurately. As a result, they may have to delay making the running descriptions and concentrate instead on describing this start-up confusion in a field diary.

The need for different types of field notes is generally acknowledged in the textbook literature on ethnographic methods. Even though concrete and descriptive field notes may have a cost – for example, a more restricted scope of the notes (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 184), events or processes can be neither interpreted nor understood until they have been well described (Denzin, 1994: 505). For the researcher, this often implies taking copious notes on what would normally appear to be everyday mundane happenings

(May, 1993: 116) and perhaps even treating rational properties of practical activities as 'anthropologically strange' (Garfinkel, 1967).

Selection and analysis of students' field notes

To approach the question of how fresh observers take on the act of observing, I have analysed as an empirical base a number of short field notes taken by students on research methods courses from 1998 to 2002 (Table 1). These field notes demonstrate the ways in which inexperienced student-researchers approach the task of doing observation studies. The continuum between naive observation and interpretative readings turned out to be especially interesting, as many students place their observation rather on the interpretive than the naive end of the scale. As listed in Table 1, the observation tasks that were given to the students varied from more strictly regulated observation during an exam to observation of choice in any public space. Observation time was short, varying from only 5 minutes to no more than 30 minutes. The students were not presented with specific research questions, but asked to focus on human interaction and on that basis develop a theme during the observation itself. The rationale behind this was to let the students (potentially) discover the strength of observation as an empirical technique.

About a fourth (Groups D and E, in total 65) of the field notes had been submitted for an exercise electronically in the form of a text document. These documents were indexed using nud-ist 4, and thereby developing 16 different themes ('free nodes' in nud-ist): wondering, interpreting, interpreting with humour, interpreting with literary references, interpreting with rich language, quantifying, assessing, experimenting, explaining, generalizing, neutral and rich, neutral and plain, extra-naive metaphor, almost naive, own reactions and own reflections. A significant number of the field notes (Groups A, B and C, in total 182) were handwritten or printed on paper, and these were indexed applying the themes developed through the data-assisted sorting of Groups D and E. These field notes were kept in the paper-based domain, using coloured stickers and text-liners to tag the documents. In the final analysis, text segments in each theme were browsed and 1–3 segments within each theme were chosen to represent the theme on the basis of limited length, that they were illustrative for the theme, and if they represented some variation in the observed settings. These text segments were translated from Norwegian as they were transferred from paper to text editor. The text segments in Groups D and E, which were already in an electronic text format, were kept in Norwegian until the first draft of this article. In total, 44 text segments² were selected from all the 247 field notes, and 23 of these are presented in this article.

There are two important ethical issues that have to be considered when applying students' work in this article. The first is the exploitation of students' work for individual research and publication purposes, and the second is the potential to make fun of students' stumbling early research-like attempts. On

TABLE 1. Overview of the field note material

<i>observer</i>	<i>ref</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>setting</i>	<i>task</i>
Student, possibly experienced, but in his 1st year in social sciences, 1998, 1999	A001-A004	4	public	Choose a suitable setting for observation, where you can spend 20 minutes with pen and paper without disturbance (ex a café, library, waiting hall, from a window, a foyer, and so on, be creative!). Observe and take notes for 20 minutes, noticing talk, work or other activity where several people are involved. Go to another place and think for 10 minutes about what you observed, and find a suitable heading. Edit the notes on a computer, ending up with 200-400 words.
	B001-B009	9		
5th year management student 2001, 2002	C001-C169	169	exam	Observe the interaction between two invigilators in 5 minutes. Make a field note from the observation on about a half page.
	D001-D037 E001-E028	37 28	public	Find a place with some kind of human activity, such as a public place where you can observe without annoying people, or a private location, where the participants are willing to be observed. Observe the activity on the place in 30 minutes. Take notes continuously. Afterwards, rewrite the notes on a computer, reflect on what you have observed and how you might have influenced those you studied just by being there.

the first issue, it must be mentioned that the observation and the field notes were an essential part of the course activities. This article is a result of having assessed a majority of the students' field notes rather than being a motivation for giving them the exercise. On the second issue, it must be noted that the topic of this paper is not the varying quality of the field notes presented, but instead the various perspectives of observing that they represent. In fact, many

of the students demonstrated an impressive ability to grasp a social situation during a very short observation.

Ten 'modes of observing'

As mentioned above, 16 themes were developed on the basis of an analysis of the students' field notes. These themes have been grouped into 10 'modes of observing': naively describing, generalizing, interpreting, wondering, explaining, quantifying, dramatizing, experimenting, reacting and reflecting, and assessing. Since it is the field notes, rather than the practical observation itself, which have been studied, I could have termed the groups 'modes of note-taking'. However, as discussed later, the note-taking reflects very closely the observing. I will present the 10 modes of observing with only a few comments and come back to a discussion about them afterwards.

NAIVELY DESCRIBING: WHAT DID I SEE HAPPEN?

As recommended by much of the literature, naive descriptions of what happens (the running records) may be a good start on an analysis. Consider the following field note from an industry recruitment stand at a university:

11:16: A boy arrives. He watches what is happening and walks away.

11:17: Two boys arrive, and remain standing in the background reading the posters.

11:19: Woman fetches more brochures and tidies the table.

11:19: Three boys arrive. Collect brochures and draw back.

11:20: A woman listens to the conversation between man and boy-1.

(Industry recruitment stand at university, D-026)

In many cases, such descriptions may seem from a reader's perspective slightly mundane. In the field note above, this is probably both because many of the entries describe individual actions, without any concerns about the interactivity of these actions. For example, how does the person responsible for the stand respond (or not) to the two boys who arrive and remain in the background? However, the somewhat detached minute recordings of actions around a stand, like the above, are useful as data on how people approach marketing stands, especially if a longer period of time is recorded. Consider the description of another housemate's morning after the night before:

10:08: Stands up and goes directly to the toilet

10:09: Drinks chocolate milk

10:09: Goes back into bed

12:08: Stands up again and goes to the toilet

12:09: Goes to the kitchen and swears because of all the empty beer bottles

- 12:09: Starts tidying away beer bottles
- 12:14: Tidies sofa pillows off the lounge floor
- 12:14: 'What is that garbage bag doing there?'
- 12:14: Scolds the dog that tries to drink beer leftovers
- 12:16: We discuss the love life of a guy we hardly know
- 12:17: Tidies away the suitcase in the lounge
- 12:18: Finds beer in the garbage bag
- 12:20: Tidies more beer bottles
- 12:21: Laughs about a friend who has had sex with a European paintball champion
- 12:22: Picks beer tops out of the fireplace
- 12:23: Dreads the four-day binge in Ås [student festival]
- 12:24: Takes the dog outside to 'pee on the tree'

(A housemate's morning after the night before, E-004)

The above field note is written in a plain minute-by-minute way and does also, to a small degree, include interactions (if only with the observer and the dog). What may make the extract more interesting than the previous one is that it describes the potentially stressful, perhaps recognizable, and slightly comical, situation of tidying up the morning after the night before. The field note may be useful as data for studying this stress. However, naive descriptions may be interesting, informative and serve as useful data, also for more mundane behaviour. Becker (1998: 77) refers to the French novelist Georges Perec, a great experimenter of 'plain description', to demonstrate that it is possible to go some distance in avoiding any form of interpretation, while still accepting that there is no 'pure' description. Becker shows how Perec would enumerate without ever commenting – for example, state that someone is 'walking fast' without supposing that the same person is 'in a hurry' (1998). Although Perec's observation is a naive one, where none of the observed persons are inscribed with strategies and motives, the observation is still reported using a varied language. Undoubtedly the concrete description of context, persons and events do not have to be dull. Some student observers use a more free language, without losing the sense of naive description, like the following two field notes, from an exam and student teamwork, respectively.

It is morning, half-past-eight, and the exam has started. The invigilators are distributed around the room, sitting at small desks. It is silent, and to communicate the guards have to whisper to each other. A middle-aged man walks between the rows of desks and is counting. Another [guard] walks from desk to desk with some papers, on which the students sign. They two meet, stop and whisper to each other, before they move on. (Invigilators, C-085)

Girl-2 and boy-2 discuss and try to solve the problem together [in a group exercise]. Boy-1 comes in with irrelevant input. Girl-1 says nothing. Boy-1 often looks

on the observers and people passing, especially the girls. He sits in the direction of the stairs and watches all people that come and go. Girl-2 and boy-2 work with the problem and discuss only what is relevant. Girl-1 and boy-1 wait on the others to find the solution and do not take part in the problem solving process. Boy-2 and girl-2 use the calculator, but still do not get any further. Girl-1 and boy-1 chat a little. Boy-1 suggests after a while an example in the text book that is relevant. Everyone turn quiet and read the book. Boy-1 and boy-2 get distracted by a girl that passes, before they go on reading. Boy-1 is continuously aware of girls passing. (Student teamwork, E-003)

Another way to avoid mundane observations is to bracket one's own knowledge in a somewhat extreme manner and apply an 'extra-naive' metaphor. Consider the following field note from an observation in a bar:

Those who stand in front of the 'standing table' lean towards it, while those behind it turn around all the time to deliver full glasses and collect empty glasses. Those who receive full glasses go and sit down beside one of the tables. It looks like they sit down by the same tables as they came from before they were going to collect their glasses. My first hypothesis is that this is some sort of factory environment, where the two-three people behind the standing table produce glasses and liquid, which those sitting in the groups process further. Some of the people by the tables seem to combine the intake of liquid with the use of paper cylinders that fill the room with smoke and dry smell. One thing that seems consistent is the degree of observation that almost everybody in the room undertakes. Even if people...seem to mainly focus on the people they share a table with, they almost continuously look around in the room. I suppose this has to do with an interest in the other groups' further processing (it strikes me as odd that they do not use more lights to have a better overview). When a very tall and blond person walks through the room, the observation intensity seems to increase. It might therefore be possible that this person is much better at processing the liquid, and that as many as possible want to learn the technique. (Activities in a bar, D-006)

In the field note above, most readers will recognize familiar elements of personnel and customers in a bar, described in an 'extra-naive' manner. The observer's preconceptions are in a sense bracketed (Husserl, 1962) in exchange for a factory metaphor. In this field note, the observer has not been sensitive to the 'indigenous meanings' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) of the actors, and so is typical of a first stage of an observational study. However, the use of the extra-naive metaphor may emphasize interesting questions about interactions in the bar, and can be useful to develop reflections thereof.

GENERALIZING: WHAT IS THE INTERACTIVE PATTERN?

Perhaps the most widespread mode of observation in the body of student field notes is that of generalizing descriptions on various levels. A low level generalization is that of, for example, referring conversations in the observer's terms instead of using verbatim situations. In many cases, we may suppose that this way of referring conversation is a result of the difficulty in recording correctly without training when recording equipment is not used. Consider, for example,

the following note from a conversation between two students: a Spaniard called Lorena and a Norwegian known as 'Little brother':

Lorena tries to tell Little brother about what she has been up to lately. She mentions that incredibly handsome guy she has met and what they are up to tonight. There are some misunderstandings because of the language, and the whole conversation goes a bit on the rocks. (A Spanish roommate and a brother, E-026)

A higher degree of generalization will include that of describing how the observed actors conform to, or develop, a social order or a pattern, or follow implicit rules of behaviour. Consider the following two field notes, both from university cafés or cantinas:

Of the students that arrived alone to the cantina, the majority appeared insecure. This applied especially to females. They browsed worried around and moved hesitatingly back and forth in the 'corridors' between the tables. Interestingly enough, they found no companionship with the other table-seekers. A couple of the boys moved around more determined, but they did not find a place to sit either, and left the cantina. The same happened to 3–4 of the young females. Few or none of the students showed an interest to get seated together with people sitting alone, and those who were looking for tables, were looking for one table each, and not together with other people in the same situation. If a table was available, one person took it, while the others kept on looking. There were also older table-seekers that came alone to the cantina. These did not seem as insecure as the younger ones, and many of them decided to take a seat by a table with people they did not know, preferably with other people at the same age. (Table-seekers in university cantina, A-003)

There are a lot of different people in the smoker's room. Here, students and caretakers meet. But people sit usually together with others of the same age. Common for almost all people approaching the smoker's room is that they bring a cup of coffee. During the time I sit there, there are two people not bringing coffee. This means that smokers usually are coffee drinkers, but I cannot draw any further conclusion. (Smoker's department of university cantina, B-009)

The first field note extract generalizes different behaviour on the basis of gender and age. The second generalizes to some degree the behaviour of smokers. Both extracts represent generalizations from personal characteristics to behaviour. Further generalization can be made by introducing a typology. Consider the following field note from an observation of people leaving a nightclub:

After having observed some time, there were three groups of party-minded people that were easy to notice:

1. couples that had found each other during the night or before, and that could not get home fast enough. These were more or less in their own world and did not notice much of what was happening around them;
2. singles that had not been 'lucky' on the town, and that desperately tried to join a 'nachspiel' [afterparty]. These were contact-seeking and desperately trying to get to know new people, to 'save' the night;

3. people in partnerships that were out with friends and that were mostly eager to get their friends over to eat or to go to their friends' place. These were only concerned about locating their friends, and were not seeking contact [with others]. (People leaving a night club, E-019)

All the three extracts exemplifying generalization represent day-to-day inductive thoughts (of what is normal or typical) that we as members of our society apply, because we 'know what any competent adult knows' (Becker, 1998: 83). Also, Van Maanen (1988) applies an 'objective mode', in which one may describe a 'typical day' for a police officer, knowing very well that there are no 'typical days'. The generalizing field note is in this case closely related to the interpreting field note.

INTERPRETING: WHY ARE THE ACTORS DOING THIS?

An interpreting observation does not have to be one in which the observer is theorizing. Rather, it is one in which the observer is suggesting something about the actors' thoughts and intentions. Consider, for example, the following two observations, of invigilators and on a bus ride, both of which are quite strongly suggestive of the actors' thoughts and feelings:

These invigilators are really serious about their responsibility. They have started getting old and do not have a lot of responsibility in their day-to-day life. I think they like the responsibility and to proudly carry the sign: 'GUARD'. Perhaps they even 'accidentally' forget to remove it after the exam, when they are about to go shopping for the long weekend. (Invigilators, C-090)

The first thing that happens is that a lady in her fifties enters the bus. The driver is flirting heavily. She finds a seat behind the elderly man. Thereafter comes one of our new citizens...No nice talk from the bus driver this time. He is probably of that kind, where Muslims are not too popular at the time being...The 50-year-old lady adjusts the fan, sweat of the flirting of the bus driver, I suppose. Babe-1 has taken a position to sleep; she was probably on a hell of a motorcycle party last night and is tired therefore. She looks like being the kind that attends such parties. (Bus ride, D-005)

These notes are slightly problematic in the way they suggest as empirical data thoughts, backgrounds and ideological prejudice of the actors, even though of which the observer has no knowledge. However, the notes might have a value in the way they present the observer's impression of what is happening, and they certainly make the data come alive in a special way.

WONDERING: WHAT IS IN THE ACTORS' MINDS?

Another variant of the interpreting observation is the wondering observation, in which the observers may suggest contextual or historical factors for the actions of the subjects observed. Field notes taken within this variant of ethnography include what the observers think to themselves, or what they think to themselves that the actors think to themselves:

I am sitting beside a man, aged around 40, with long beard, sailor's cap, old and worn-out wind jacket and trousers. He has dirty hands, and carries a smell of boat engine and keelson. He smiles and takes his bag into his lap as I sit down, and

several times during the trip up to the city border, we have eye contact and smile to each other. He seems like a nice guy, and I think to myself that I could have asked him why he has spills of old motor oil on his hands, if he has a thermos and an empty lunch-pack in his bag, and if he has been spending the Saturday working with that boat he is restoring. Is that the reason why he is smiling? That he has spent a whole day with his favourite hobby? (Bus ride, B-007)

The carpenter from 'The Neighbour' [a local pub] carries a long piece of wood out again. Was it too long? Another car drives across the Old Town Bridge. Another car follows behind it. Both of them have to back [since the bridge is closed]. Two people come up from The Neighbour. [They] take a photo of the entrance and walk across the bridge to the city centre. The carpenter is back with another piece of wood. Maybe this is shorter? Two girls stop outside The Neighbour and talk for a long time. A boy comes walking with a bike and they all walk together. Meeting point? (Overlooking local street, D-001)

Even if students are asked to reflect in the field notes on what they have observed afterwards, they tend to, as in this case, wonder about actors' strategies. Whereas the interpreting field notes earlier are concerned with categorizing actors ('She looks like being the kind ...'), the wondering field notes are more concerned with individual strategies that the observed actors might be following.

EXPLAINING: CAN THIS BE THE REASON?

Another way of describing what is happening with the actors observed is to use explanations on their behaviour. The explaining field notes suggest actors' behaviour because of contextual changes. Consider, for example, the following notes taken in the exam situation:

The reason for the change in [the way the invigilators interacted] can be that when the exam started, it was quiet like in a grave...but when a couple of hours had passed, the students started turning pages back and forth, writing out from the drafts, change paper, move paper, crunch paper, more students went out to get some fresh air, and many started eating. The sound level in the room became higher, and the guards, that earlier had been keeping calm, were influenced by the sound level so they became more active. Another explanation could be that they were sleepy when they came, but woke up after a while. (Invigilators, C-157)

The explaining field notes present a more causal model for how people are acting in a special situation than the above-mentioned interpreting and wondering field notes.

QUANTIFYING: HOW MANY ARE THERE?

Quantifying data is one important strategy within so-called systematic observation. But also, when thrown into the field, it might be a intuitively occurring strategy. Consider, for instance, a systematic observation of the number of conversations in a social setting where the norm is silence:

During the 5-minute period, [invigilators] A & B talk together 10 times. They speak rather quietly... Twice they support their heads in their hands at the same time, and once they start biting their nails at the same time. (Invigilators, C-003)

In other situations, one may end up counting instances of various standardized actions. For instance, at a road crossing that is regulated with signal lights, movements are more or less restricted to certain directions and timings:

Green signal for [direction number] 3: 1 bus, 6 cars

Green signal for [direction number] 2: 2 cars, 1 bus and 1 scooter

Green walking signal: 7 persons, one couple crosses one street at a time [and] have to use two green lights to cross the street [diagonally], 2 baby carriages

Green signal for 3: 10 cars, 3 buses

Green signal for 2: 6 cars

Green walking signal: 15 people, 1 bike, 1 carriage, most walks towards downtown

Green signal for 3: 2 buses, 6 cars

Green signal for 2: 2 cars

At 10:08: Green walking signal: 9 people, all towards downtown, 5 of them as a group of adults, one mother with 2 kids, all on bikes

PS! Sounds from an emergency vehicle, cannot see what it is, the activity in the crossing comes to a halt a little. (Traffic-signal regulated street crossing, D-015)

In this example of road-crossing behaviour, counting traffic is quite a sensible mode of observation. By longer observation, one may accumulate data for a substantive empirical study by quantifying structural parameters like the above example.

DRAMATIZING: CAN MY OBSERVATION BE INTERESTING?

As researchers, or students, we often fear that the text we produce will be mundane. Any article or essay is supposed to be articulate, a 'good read', and at best have a certain literary quality. Consider for example the following note:

The invigilator scouts over the waving surface of student heads. Her body is relaxed, but the head is held high. The eyes are vigilant. With the slightest sign of movement, she is on her feet, ready to deliver a sheet of paper before any of the other [invigilators] reaches the [delivery point]. But once more, it was too late. The guard from left came first. She cast a glance around herself, in despair, tries to find another one, but in vain. She pulls back. (Invigilators, C-066)

The use of descriptive metaphors, such as 'waving surface of student heads', gives the reader an idea of how the observer perceives the exam hall. In this case, the observer also (dramatically) interprets the reactions of the actors – for example, by suggesting that the invigilator is 'in despair'. The above extract is mostly concerned with the description of actions, but similar dramatized or literary descriptions may be used for appearance as well. Consider the note taken from an observation of a young woman at a bookshop cafe:

Already when I came in, a young woman sat sprawling, possibly at the cost of some sort of pent-up feminine grace, but seemingly comfortably recumbent in a two-seat cream-colored sofa, with a pose that could indicate a somewhat unreflecting

radiant, accidentally and perhaps not completely successfully composed of signals from Arabic harems, street walkers from 17th century Paris and an averagely tired housewife from a Norwegian 1930s' household... The woman moved aesthetically, perhaps slightly heavily made up, but with an unquestionable charm and possibly fêted in periods if she would wish for it. She leaned from time to time forward and sipping her little coffee cup with good manners and a pleasant mechanical motoric. Her hair was put on untidy, her skin silk soft as a summer day, a captivating tip of the nose, an overwhelming potential for an occupying smile (which was never confirmed).... (Woman in a bookshop café, E-008)

This field note is extreme in its verbose description of appearance, turning the activity of taking field notes into a literary task. Especially the choice of unusual adjectives and historical or geographical references implies a degree of implicit interpretation. Many students try to use a more literary style of language to make descriptions more readable. I also suspect they made notes this way because the small observation field note was one of the very few unrestricted text exercises during their course of study. Compared to a naive description, a note such as the above may lose research-related validity by the way it represents a very personal description, or rather literary reconstruction of a social situation. But, in compensation, it documents the observer's response fairly well.

EXPERIMENTING: IF I DO THIS, WHAT HAPPENS?

Another strategy chosen by some observers is to manipulate the social situation, by imposing some kind of impact or 'stimulus' on actors in the situation to look for possible responses. Stimuli may be rather subtle, but still effective:

I deliberately look right between two invigilators so that a[n implicit] message may appeal to both of them. The reaction comes quickly. They both winced, but the closest with a slight head start. The quickest turns around to the other guard and nods confirmingly that she takes the job. (Invigilators, C-074)

The last person in our part of the room had brought along a notebook, in which he was already taking notes when we arrived... With a light and supple hand..., he was writing constantly for at least 25 minutes. Behind the dark façade, it was however difficult for us to learn what treasures [this book might hold], since he did not share them with us. Even when [my co-observer] started clearing his throat and coughing unrestrained, while I sneezed and blew my nose constantly, our mystic man kept cool. Our try to influence the atmosphere did not make any impact, neither on him or the other guests. We were totally ignored. (Coffee shop, D-009)

In the extract from the exam hall, a rather subtle stimulus within the expected norm is responded to very quickly. In the coffee shop extract, stimuli outside the norm for the context is totally ignored, which may be understood as a strategy from the other guests to save the observers' face, as described by Goffman (1967).

REFLECTING AND REACTING: BEING INFLUENCED BY THE FIELD

The observers may also be influenced by other people whom they observe or by the situation of being an observer. The first extract is basically a methodological field note, as suggested by Burgess (1984):

It was fun and educational to observe. I thought about the situation, the mood, and the communication in the room in a completely different way now, when I was so conscious about it. I think the others in the room were behaving normally, but they shouted out in-between when it (re-)occurred to them that I was observing. I don't think they thought about it all the time. Maybe I should do this more often? (A shared student apartment, E-025)

The other extract is actually referring to the observer's physical reaction to his observations:

I must say that mate-2 is really scratching inside his ear now. Digging and digging, out with the finger to see what he has found. Nothing there after the first try. In with the finger again, out with it to study what came out this time. To look at it is disgusting. I don't want to look, but I have to. I feel sick now. Thank God...that I am stepping out of the bus at this stop. (Bus ride, D-005)

Although this field note may seem a bit exaggerated, there are large variations on how we as individuals react to sights and odours. Both physical and strong emotional reactions might be expected in research in the social world. In some cases, the researcher will have to protect himself to avoid getting involved – for instance, in dangerous situations (Nordstrom and Robben, 1995; Sampson and Thomas, 2003) – but he may also utilize 'emotionally-sensed knowledge' analytically (Hubbard et al., 2001).

ASSESSING: EVALUATING PEOPLE'S BEHAVIOUR

The last category of observation includes assessment of other people's behaviour, like the following extract taken in a grocery store:

If the customer pays with a bank-card, he is quicker by the cashier, than if he pays with cash. The prototype of what you don't want to stand behind in the queue, if you are in a hurry, was observed 15.05... From where I was sitting I could see the old lady empty her coin purse in the change tray and start counting. She was not very quick, and the result was ...that she had to put all the coins back and pay with bills instead. Those things are frustrating both for the salesman and the poor [customers] back in the queue. Luckily, there was not much of this fumbling. (Cashier queue in a grocery store, D-022)

In this field note, the observer assesses the behaviour of the observed actors on the basis on his own experiences with standing in a queue. The note-taking is clearly normative and abandons the idea of a pure description.

Discussion

I have presented 10 different modes of observation: naively describing, generalizing, interpreting, wondering, explaining, quantifying, dramatizing, experimenting, reacting and reflecting, and assessing. There are two main conclusions to draw from the analysis of these field notes. On the one hand, students in general seem to be capable of grasping a situation with only very short observation (not very surprising on the basis of what ethnomethodology has been

demonstrating for many years). On the other hand, the implicit interpretation and generalization of many field notes needs to be addressed as a potential problem to overcome in order to prepare students to use observation as research method. Our human ability to implicitly interpret a social situation, in which we are part, may obstruct our qualities as observers. However, the same ability is of great value to understand what we have observed.

The efficiency of observation as a research methodology in the social sciences is based on the ability to collect meaningful data in a short time. However, this efficiency also poses a problem – namely, that of jumping to conclusions at a very early stage of a research project. As Bechhofer and Paterson (2000: 96) suggest, if we are all expert everyday analysts of social life, by actually living in the situation rather than asking questions about it, social scientists might turn this to their advantage. By putting emphasis on observation and on casual interaction rather than on the interview, social life can be seen as interactive and negotiated and understood by the social scientist through interpretation (Bechhofer and Paterson, 2000: 97). When observing a group of people, researchers will ask themselves who is initiating changes in activities for whom, and make structural observations, go beyond counting to observe, record and interpret the verbal content of conversations (Whyte, 1984). In everyday life, we are constantly interpreting such verbal content, and this may lead us to take a lot for granted ‘because we are, after all, competent adult members of our society and know what any competent adult knows’ (Becker, 1998: 83). The question is if this must be entirely an intuitive operation, subject to no checks on its validity and reliability (Whyte, 1984).

Denzin (2002: 355–6) is concerned with the researcher’s bracketing (Husserl, 1962) of an observed social phenomenon, by treating it as a text or a document – that is, as an instance being studied. The researcher does not interpret a phenomenon in terms of the standard meanings given to it in the existing literature. Hence, scholarly interpretations of social life do not spring out at the fieldworker, but are results of intense and usually lengthy effort (Bechhofer and Paterson, 2000: 103).

Moreover, the researcher needs to pay attention to how they wish to handle the distinction between *literal*, *interpretive* and *reflexive* ‘readings’ (Mason, 1996: 69), or the three interrelated forms of ethnographic knowledge: description, interpretation and explanation (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998: 118). Hence, a particular study may focus more on the description of the life and practices of a group, the interpretation of its symbolic systems, or the explanation of features in social life. What the analysis of the brief field notes in this article has demonstrated most of all is how researchers are embedded in a context of explanation that intrudes into the context of the data. Even though the observations presented in this article are very short and on the basis of rather broad ‘research exercises’ (Table 1), where most observers have taken a somewhat distant view (as non-participants), the analysis of the field notes show that many of the observers are drawn very quickly to interpret situations. More

experienced students and researchers working on a more focused research task may on the one hand be better trained to do naive descriptions, but may on the other hand also be more embedded in theory-laden expectancies. Further, in ethnography based on longer participant observation with an observer who is interacting with the subjects studied, one may need to be even more aware of the problem of including interpretations as descriptions (as part of the 'going native' dilemma). This problem may prove especially relevant in cases where field notes have to be taken in isolation from the actual observation, and need to be based on memory in larger extent. Although the field notes in this article are collected from fresh observers' work, there is therefore reason to believe that the problems addressed, and the variations presented with the 'modes', are relevant also for more experienced observers. The ethnographer cannot get away from being involved (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998: 112).

Corbetta argues that the researcher should not attempt to emulate the novelist: 'he should provide descriptions rather than evaluations or impressions, or elements of interpretation' (2003: 246). Van Maanen (1988), on the other hand, acknowledges the literary quality in ethnographic descriptions, as 'impressionist tales', for the fieldworkers to display their own day-by-day experiences in the field, often by drawing attention to special events that do not represent the ordinary, but nevertheless give the reader a glimpse into the special experience of being an ethnographer. These tales are contrasted to the 'realist tale', a 'documentary style focused on minute, sometimes precious, but thoroughly mundane details of everyday life among the people studied' (Van Maanen, 1988: 48), in which the ethnographer as author almost disappears, and 'confessional tales', interpretive aspects of the ethnographer's descriptions. What seems to be important is that a world comprised of meanings, interpretations, feelings, talk and interaction must be scrutinized on its own terms (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997: 13) and that various 'tales' are kept separated. According to Becker (1998), a problem is that social scientists, and students who have produced the field notes used in this article, ordinarily expect to be given interpretations in what they read and to rely on them in what they write. Observers think of the details of their work as the basis for generalizations, as samples whose interest lies in their generalizability, in the interpretations that explain what the details stand for. But, as suggested by Becker (1998), perhaps these interpretations are not as necessary as we think. 'We can get a lot from simpler, less analysed observations. The appropriate ratio of description to interpretation is a real problem every describer of the social world has to solve or come to terms with' (Becker, 1998: 79).

The field note extracts presented in this article are based on the work of first-time observers with little training in research methodology or social science. The students had to use some sort of intuition, or informed hunches, to make sense of activities observed and to develop a way of 'seeing' what was evident in the social setting (Janesick, 1998: 61). An important finding presented in this article is in support of Whyte's argument that observation is a scientific

empirical method that can be learned and that does not necessarily require a 'rare type of skill' (Whyte, 1984: 96). What the ethnographer needs is what Glaser (1978) terms the ability of 'conceptualization', to be able to develop theories from fieldwork. It means that the analyst can in most cases enter the field with complete openness:

He can go anywhere and talk and listen to anyone and read anything with virtually no problem in mind and little training in a perspective, *provided he is capable of conceptualization*. He can do this because relevant problems and processes quickly emerge – almost too fast – sufficiently enough to start theoretically sampling for the emerging theory. (Glaser, 1978: 44)

However, the range of observation modes presented in this article shows that this openness to what cannot a priori be pre-codified results in the basic tension underlying in situ studies. According to Baszanger and Dodier (1997: 9), the flexibility required by this openness 'conflicts with the need to maintain at least a minimum of method in the conduct of the study – that is, a certain guide for the behaviour both of the fieldworker and the people observed, depending on the plan of the study'. As described earlier in the article, the plans of study for the notes taken by students presented here are very open indeed (see Table 1), and the variation of observation and note-taking strategies may be much larger than in a focused research project. Moreover, exactly because of the variation presented in this article, there are good reasons to address questions of observation and taking field notes in research projects where observers of varied experience are involved.

In two of the observation exercises given, presented here as Groups D and E (Table 1), the students were asked, as part of their assignment, to consider 'observer effects' – that is, to reflect on what they had observed and how they might have influenced those they studied just by being there. Although some students were able to discuss the way they directly influenced the behaviour of those observed, many observers would assume that they might take a role as a neutral observer. This was especially those students who applied a mode of observation that involved manipulation, and would consciously use their own position, appearance, sex and so on whom to influence people whom they observed. However, the field notes taken demonstrate that more emphasis needs to be put on the observer's position in any observational setting; as, for example, demonstrated by an autobiographical turn in anthropology (Okely and Callaway, 1992). In teaching observational methods, it is therefore necessary to stress the 'ethnographer's self as positioned subject' (Okely, 1992: 24) as part of the field note text. Further exercises may invite fresh observers to elaborate on their position within the observed, starting out with challenging a notion of the observer being a neutral open-minded empirical instrument.

As mentioned by Wolfinger (2002: 93), field notes, given their importance to ethnographic scholarship, deserve the same self-scrutiny that other prose is routinely subjected to. By studying field notes taken by various observers, one may identify variations that the openness of the researcher provides. As

demonstrated in this study of student field notes, fresh observers are capable of grasping situations quickly, and, as mentioned by Berg (1998: 146), they are often amazed to learn just how much material they can recall even without any specific training. However, the fresh observers conceptualize and take notes very differently. The act of observing may be intuitive, but taking field notes that are usable for social research seems to require some methodological training, as well as a level of reflection on the researcher's role. By focusing more on developing field notes, one may be able to produce better input to such training, and thereby to social research.

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NOTES

1. The following volumes were browsed, since they were available and accessible at the time of writing this article: *Qualitative Inquiry* Vol. 5 (1999)–Vol. 10 (2004); *Qualitative Research* Vol. 1 (2001)–Vol. 3 (2003); *Field Methods* Vol. 14 (2002)–Vol. 15 (2003); *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* Vol. 27 (1999)–Vol. 33 (2004); and *Qualitative Health Research* Vol. 9 (1999)–Vol. 14 (2004).
2. Text segments were collected from all the groups: 1 from A, 2 from B, 16 from C, 16 from D, and 9 from E.

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