

Folk Wisdom About Human Observation

In the fields of observation, chance favors the prepared mind.

—Louis Pasteur (1822-1895)

People only see what they are prepared to see.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

Every student who takes an introductory psychology or sociology course learns that human perception is highly selective. When looking at the same scene or object, different people will see different things. What people "see" is highly dependent on their interests, biases, and backgrounds. Our culture shapes what we see, our early childhood socialization forms how we look at the world, and our value systems tell us how to interpret what passes before our eyes. How, then, can one trust observational data?

In their classic guide for users of social science research, Katzer, Cook, and Crouch (1978) titled their chapter on observation "Seeing Is Not Believing." They open with an oft-repeated story meant to demonstrate the problem with observational data.

Once at a scientific meeting, a man suddenly rushed into the midst of one of the sessions. Another man with a revolver was chasing him. They scuffled in plain view of the assembled researchers, a shot was fired, and they rushed out. About twenty seconds had elapsed. The chairperson of the session immediately asked all present to write down an account of what they had seen. The observers did not know that the ruckus had been planned, rehearsed, and photographed. Of the forty reports turned in, only one was less than 20 percent mistaken about the principal facts, and most were more than 40 percent mistaken. The event surely drew the undivided attention of the observers, was in full view at close

■ knowing how to separate detail from trivia to achieve the former without being overwhelmed by the latter;

■ using rigorous methods to validate and triangulate observations; and

■ reporting the strengths and limitations of one's own perspective, which requires both self-knowledge and self-disclosure.

Training observers can be particularly challenging because so many people think that they are "natural" observers and therefore have little to learn. Training to become a skilled observer is a no less rigorous process than the training necessary to become a skilled survey researcher or statistician. People don't "naturally" know how to write good survey items or analyze statistics—and people don't "naturally" know how to do systematic research observations. All forms of scientific inquiry require training and practice.

Careful preparation for entering into fieldwork is as important as disciplined training. Though I have considerable experience doing observational fieldwork, had I been present at the scientific meeting where the shooting scene occurred my recorded observations might not have been significantly more accurate than those of my less trained colleagues because *I would not have been prepared to observe what occurred*, and, lacking that preparation, would have been seeing things through my ordinary eyes rather than my scientific observer's eyes.

Preparation has mental, physical, intellectual, and psychological dimensions. Pasteur said, "In the fields of observation, chance favors the prepared mind." Part of preparing the mind is learning how to concentrate during the observation. Observation, for me, involves enormous energy and concentration. I have to "turn on" that concentration—"turn on" my scientific eyes

and ears, my observational senses. A scientific observer cannot be expected to engage in systematic observation on the spur of the moment any more than a world-class boxer can be expected to defend his title spontaneously on a street corner or an Olympic runner can be asked to dash off at record speed because someone suddenly thinks it would be nice to test the runner's time. Athletes, artists, musicians, dancers, engineers, and scientists require training and mental preparation to do their best. Experiments and simulations that document the inaccuracy of spontaneous observations made by untrained and unprepared observers are no more indicative of the potential quality of observational methods than an amateur community talent show is indicative of what professional performers can do.

Two points are critical, then, in this introductory section. First, the folk wisdom about observation being nothing more than selective perception is true in the ordinary course of participating in day-to-day events. Second, the skilled observer is able to improve the accuracy, authenticity, and reliability of observations through intensive training and rigorous preparation. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to helping evaluators and researchers move their observations from the level of ordinary looking to the rigor of systematic seeing.

The Value of Direct Observations

I'm often asked by students: "Isn't interviewing just as good as observation? Do you really have to go see a program directly to evaluate it? Can't you find out all you need to know by talking to people in the program without going there and seeing it firsthand?"

I reply by relating my experience evaluating a leadership development program with

two colleagues. As part of a formative evaluation aimed at helping staff and funders clarify and improve the program's design before undertaking a comprehensive follow-up study for a summative evaluation, we went through the program as participant observers. After completing the six-day leadership retreat, we met to compare experiences. Our very first conclusion was that we would never have understood the program without personally experiencing it. It bore little resemblance to our expectations, what people had told us, or the official program description. Had we designed the follow-up study without having participated in the program, we would have completely missed the mark and asked inappropriate questions. To absorb the program's language, understand nuances of meaning, appreciate variations in participants' experiences, capture the importance of what happened outside formal activities (during breaks, over meals, in late-night gatherings and parties), and feel the intensity of the retreat environment—nothing could have substituted for direct experience with the program. Indeed, what we observed and experienced was that participants were changed as much or more by what happened outside the formal program structure and activities as by anything that happened through the planned curriculum and exercises.

The first-order purposes of observational data are to *describe* the setting that was observed, the activities that took place in that setting, the people who participated in those activities, and the meanings of what was observed from the perspectives of those observed. The descriptions should be factual, accurate, and thorough without being cluttered by irrelevant minutiae and trivia. The quality of observational reports is judged by the extent to which that observation permits

the reader to enter into and understand the situation described. In this way, evaluation users, for example, can come to understand program activities and impacts through detailed descriptive information about what has occurred in a program and how the people in the program have reacted to what has occurred.

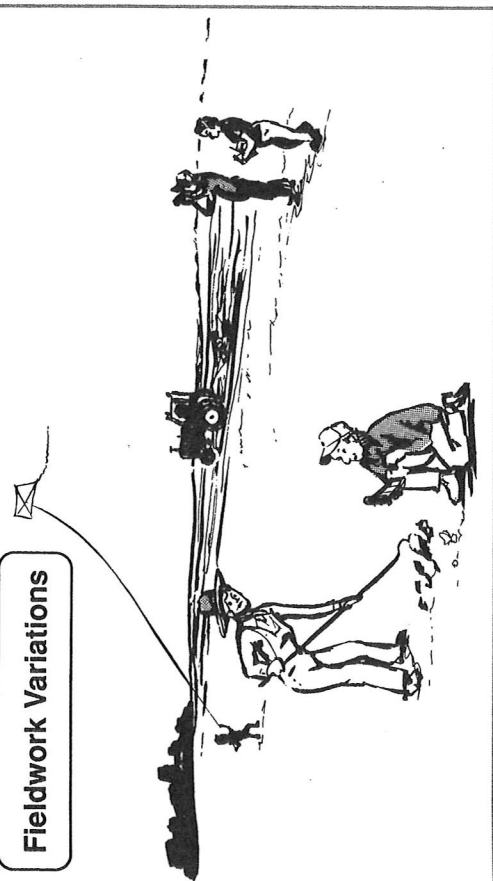
Naturalistic observations take place *in the field*. For ethnographers, the field is a cultural setting. For qualitative organizational development researchers, the field will be an organization. For evaluators, the field is the program being studied. Many terms are used for talking field-based observations including *participant observation*, *fieldwork*, *qualitative observation*, *direct observation*, and *field research*. "All these terms refer to the circumstance of being in or around an on-going social setting for the purpose of making a qualitative analysis of that setting" (Lofland 1971:93).

Direct, personal contact with and observations of a setting have several advantages. First, through direct observations the inquirer is better able to understand and capture the context within which people interact. Understanding context is essential to a holistic perspective.

Second, firsthand experience with a setting and the people in the setting allows an inquirer to be open, discovery oriented, and inductive because, by being on-site, the observer has less need to rely on prior conceptualizations of the setting, whether those prior conceptualizations are from written documents or verbal reports.

A third strength of observational fieldwork is that the inquirer has the opportunity to see things that may routinely escape awareness among the people in the setting. For someone to provide information in an interview, he or she must be aware enough to report the desired information. Because

Fieldwork Variations



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all social systems involve routines, participants in those routines may take them so much for granted that they cease to be aware of important nuances that are apparent only to an observer who has not become fully immersed in those routines.

The participant observer can also discover things no one else has ever really paid attention to. One of the highlights of the leadership training program we experienced was the final evening banquet at which staff was roasted. For three nights, after training ended, participants worked to put together a program of jokes, songs, and skits for the banquet. Staff were never around for these preparations, which lasted late into the night, but they had come to count on this culminating event. Month after month for two years each completely new training group had organized a final banquet event to both honor and make fun of staff. Staff assumed that either prior participants passed on this tradition or it was a nat-

ural result of the bonding among participants. We learned that neither explanation was true. What actually occurred was that, unbeknownst to program staff, the dining hostess for the hotel where participants stayed initiated the roast. After the second evening's meal, when staff routinely departed for a meeting, the hostess would tell participants what was expected. She even brought out a photo album of past banquets and offered to supply joke books, costumes, music, or whatever. This 60-year-old woman had begun playing what amounted to a major staff role for one of the most important processes in the program—and the staff didn't know about it. We learned about it by being there.

A fourth value of direct observation is the chance to learn things that people would be unwilling to talk about in an interview. Interviewees may be unwilling to provide information on sensitive topics, especially to strangers. A fifth advantage of fieldwork is

the opportunity to move beyond the selective perceptions of others. Interviews present the understandings of the people being interviewed. Those understandings constitute important, indeed critical, information. However, it is necessary for the inquirer to keep in mind that interviewees are always reporting perceptions—selective perceptions. Field observers will also have selective perceptions. By making their own perceptions part of the data—a matter of training, discipline, and self-awareness—observers can arrive at a more comprehensive view of the setting being studied than if forced to rely entirely on secondhand reports through interviews.

Finally, getting close to the people in a setting through firsthand experience permits the inquirer to draw on personal knowledge during the formal interpretation stage of analysis. Reflection, and introspection are important parts of field research. The impressions and feelings of the observer become part of the data to be used in attempting to understand a setting and the people who inhabit it. The observer takes in information and forms impressions that go beyond what can be fully recorded in even the most detailed field notes.

Because [the observer] sees and hears the people he studies in many situations of the kind that normally occur for them, rather than just in an isolated and formal interview, he builds an ever-growing fund of impressions, many of them at the subliminal level, which give him an extensive base for the interpretation and analytic use of any particular datum. This wealth of information and impression sensitizes him to subtleties which might pass unnoticed in an interview and forces him to raise continually new and different questions, which he brings to and tries to answer in

succeeding observations. (Becker and Geer 1970:32)

Observation-Based Evaluation and Applied Research in a Political World

The preceding review of the advantages of fieldwork strikes me as fairly straightforward but a bit abstract. In a moment, we'll consider the details of how to do fieldwork, but to inform that transition and reinforce the importance of direct observation in the real world, let me offer a perspective from the world of children's stories. Some of the most delightful, entertaining, and suspenseful fairy tales and fables concern tales of kings who discard their royal robes to take on the apparel of peasants so that they can move freely among their people to really understand what is happening in their kingdoms. Our modern-day kings and political figures are more likely to take television crews with them when they make excursions among the people. They are unlikely to go out secretly disguised, moving through the streets anonymously, unless they're up to mischief. It is left, then, to applied researchers and evaluators to play out the fable, to take on the appropriate appearance and mannerisms that will permit easy movement among the people, sometimes secretly, sometimes openly, but always with the purpose of better understanding what the world is really like. They are then able to report those understandings to our modern-day version of kings so that policy wisdom can be enhanced and programmatic decisions enlightened. At least that's the fantasy. Turning that fantasy into reality involves a number of important decisions about what kind of fieldwork to do. We turn now to those decisions.

Variations in Observational Methods

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.¹

—T. S. Eliot (1888-1965)

Observational research explores the world in many ways. Deciding which observational approaches are appropriate for evaluation or action research involves different criteria than those same decisions made to undertake basic social scientific research. These differences emerge from the nature of applied research, the politics of evaluation, the nature of contract funding in most evaluations, and the accountability of evaluators to information users. Thus, while field methods have their origins in basic anthropological and sociological field methods, using these methods for evaluation often requires adaptation. The sections that follow will discuss both the similarities and differences between evaluation field methods and basic research field methods.

Variations in Observer Involvement: Participant or Onlooker or Both?

The first and most fundamental distinction that differentiates observational strategies concerns the extent to which the observer will be a *participant* in the setting being studied. This involves more than a simple choice between participation and nonparticipation. The extent of participation is a continuum that varies from complete immersion in the setting as full participant to complete separation from the setting as spectator, with a great deal of variation

along the continuum between these two end points.

Nor is it simply a matter of deciding at the beginning how much the observer will participate. The extent of participation can change over time. In some cases, the researcher may begin the study as an onlooker and gradually become a participant as fieldwork progresses. The opposite can also occur. An evaluator might begin as a complete participant to experience what it is like to be initially immersed in the program and then gradually withdraw participation over the period of the study until finally taking the role of occasional observer from an onlooker stance.

Full participant observation constitutes an omnibus field strategy in that it "simultaneously combines document analysis, interviewing of respondents and informants, direct participation and observation, and introspection" (Denzin 1978b: 183). If, on the other hand, an evaluator observes a program as an onlooker, the processes of observation can be separated from interviewing. In participant observation, however, no such separation exists. Typically, anthropological fieldworkers combine in their field notes data from personal, eyewitness observation with information gained from informal, natural interviews and informants' descriptions (Pelto and Pelto 1978:5). Thus, the participant observer employs multiple and overlapping data collection strategies: being fully engaged in experiencing the setting

(participation) while at the same time observing and talking with other participants about whatever is happening.

In the leadership program I evaluated through participant observation, I was a full participant in all exercises and program activities using the field of evaluation as my leadership arena (since all participants had to have an arena of leadership as their focus). As did other participants, I developed close relationships with some people as the week progressed, sharing meals and conversing late into the night. I sometimes took detailed notes during activities if the activity permitted (e.g., group discussion), while at other times I waited until later to record notes (e.g., after meals). If a situation suddenly became emotional, for example during a small group encounter, I would cease to take notes so as to be fully present as well as to keep my note taking from becoming a distraction. Unlike other participants, I sat in on staff meetings and knew how staff viewed what was going on. Much of the time I was fully immersed in the program experience as a participant, but I was also always aware of my additional role as evaluation observer.

The extent to which it is possible for an evaluator to become a participant in a program will depend partly on the nature of the program. In human service and education programs that serve children, the evaluator cannot participate as a child but may be able to participate as a volunteer, parent, or staff member in such a way as to develop the perspective of an insider in one of those adult roles. Gender can create barriers to participant observation. Males can't be participants in female-only programs (e.g., battered women's shelters). Females doing fieldwork in nonliterate cultures may not be permitted access to male-only councils and ceremonies. Programs that serve special populations may also involve natural limitations on the extent to which the evaluator

can become a full participant. For example, a researcher who is not chemically dependent will not be able to become a full participant, physically and psychologically, in a chemical dependency program, even though it may be possible to participate in the program as a client. Such participation in a treatment program can lead to important insights and understanding about what it is like to be in the program; however, the evaluator must avoid the delusion that participation has been complete. This point is illustrated by an exchange between an inmate and a student who was doing participant observation in a prison.

Inmate: "What are you in here for, man?"

Student: "I'm here for a while to find out what it's like to be in prison."

Inmate: "What do you mean—'find out what it's like'?"

Evaluator: "I'm here so that I can experience prison from the inside instead of just studying what it's like from out there."

Inmate: "You got to be jerkin' me off, man. 'Experience from the inside . . . ?' Shit, man, you can go home when you decide you've had enough can't you?"

Evaluator: "Yeah."

Inmate: "Then you ain't never gonna know what it's like from the inside."

Social, cultural, political, and interpersonal factors can limit the nature and degree of participation in participant observation. For example, if the participants in a program all know each other intimately they may object to an outsider trying to become part of their close circle. Where marked social class differences exist between a sociologist and people in a neighborhood, access will be more difficult; likewise, when, as is often the

case, an evaluator is well educated and middle class while welfare program clients are economically disadvantaged and poorly educated, the participants in the program may object to any use of "full" participant observation. Program staff will sometimes object to the additional burden of including an evaluator in a program where resources are limited and an additional participant would unbalance staff-client ratios. Thus, in evaluation, the extent to which full participation is possible and desirable will depend on the precise nature of the program, the political context, and the nature of the evaluation questions being asked. Adult training programs, for example, may permit fairly easy access for full participation by evaluators. Offender treatment programs are much less likely to be open to participant observation as an evaluation method. Evaluators must therefore be flexible, sensitive, and adaptive in negotiating the precise degree of participation that is appropriate in any particular observational study, especially where reporting timelines are constrained so entry into the setting must be accomplished relatively quickly. Social scientists who can take a long time to become integrated into the setting under study have more options for fuller participant observation.

As these examples illustrate, full and complete participation in a setting, what is sometimes called "going native," is fairly rare, especially for a program evaluation. Degree of participation and nature of observation vary along a wide continuum of possibilities. The ideal in evaluation is to design and negotiate that degree of participation that will yield the most meaningful data about the program given the characteristics of the participants, the nature of staff-participant interactions, the socio-political context of the program, and the information needs of intended evaluation users. Likewise, in applied and basic re-

search, the purpose, scope, length, and setting for the study will dictate the range and types of participant observation that are possible.

One final caution: The researcher's plans and intentions regarding the degree of program involvement to be experienced may not be the way things actually turn out. Lang and Lang (1960) report that two scientific participant observers who were studying audience behavior at a Billy Graham evangelical crusade made their "decision for Christ" and left their observer posts to walk down the aisle and join Reverend Graham's campaign. Such are the occupational hazards (or benefits, depending on your perspective) of real-world fieldwork.

Insider and Outsider Perspectives: Emic Versus Etic Approaches

People who are insiders to a setting being studied often have a view of the setting and any findings about it quite different from that of the outside researchers who are conducting the study. (Bartunek and Louis 1996)

Ethnoscenarist Kenneth Pike (1954) coined the terms *emic* and *etic* to distinguish classification systems reported by anthropologists based on (1) the language and categories used by the people in the culture studied, an emic approach, in contrast to (2) an emic approach created by anthropologists based on their analysis of important cultural distinctions, an etic approach. Leading anthropologists such as Franz Boas and Edward Sapir argued that the only meaningful distinctions were those made by people within a culture, that is, from the emic perspective. However, as anthropologists turned to more comparative studies, engaging in cross-cultural analyses, distinctions that cut across cultures had to be made based on the anthro-

pologist's analytical perspective, that is, an etic perspective. The etic approach involved "standing far enough away from or outside of a particular culture to see its separate events, primarily in relation to their similarities and their differences, as compared to events in other cultures" (Pike 1954:10). For some years a debate raged in anthropology about the relative merits of etic versus etic perspectives (Pelto and Pelto 1978:55-60; Headland, Pike, and Harris 1990), but, as often happens over time, both approaches came to be understood as valuable, though each contributes something different. Nevertheless, tension between these perspectives remains:

Today, despite or perhaps because of the new recognition of cultural diversity, the tension between universalistic and relativistic values remains an unresolved conundrum for the Western ethnographer. In practice, it becomes this question: By which values are observations to be guided? The choices seem to be either the values of the ethnographer or the values of the observed—that is, in modern parlance, either the *etic* or the *emic*. . . . Herein lies a deeper and more fundamental problem: How is it possible to understand the other when the other's values are not one's own? This problem arises to plague ethnography at a time when Western Christian values are no longer a surety of truth and, hence, no longer the benchmark from which self-confidently valid observations can be made. (Vidich and Lyman 2000:41)

Methodologically, the challenge is to do justice to both perspectives during and after fieldwork and to be clear with one's self and one's audience how this tension is managed.

A participant observer shares as intimately as possible in the life and activities of the setting under study in order to develop an *insider's view* of what is happening, the

emic perspective. This means that the participant observer not only sees what is happening but feels what it is like to be a part of the setting or program. Anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker (1966) has described the basic assumption undergirding participant observation as follows: "To understand a society, the anthropologist has traditionally immersed himself in it, learning, as far as possible, to think, see, feel and sometimes act as a member of its culture and at the same time as a trained anthropologist from another culture" (p. 9).

Experiencing the setting or program as an insider accentuates the participant part of participant observation. At the same time, the inquirer remains aware of being an outsider. The challenge is to combine participation and observation so as to become capable of understanding the setting as an insider while describing it to and for outsiders.

Obtaining something of the understanding of an insider is, for most researchers, only a first step. They expect, in time, to become capable of thinking and acting within the perspective of two quite different groups, the one in which they were reared and—to some degree—the one they are studying. They will also, at times, be able to assume a mental position peripheral to both, a position from which they will be able to perceive and, hopefully, describe those relationships, systems and patterns of which an inextricably involved insider is not likely to be consciously aware. For what the social scientist realizes is that while the outsider simply does not know the meanings or the patterns, the insider is so immersed that he may be oblivious to the fact that patterns exist. . . . What fieldworkers eventually produce out of the tension developed by this ability to shift their point of view depends upon their sophistication, ability, and training. Their task, in any case, is to realize what they have experienced

and learned and to communicate this in terms that will illumine. (Wax 1971:3)

Who Conducts the Inquiry? Solo and Team Versus Participatory and Collaborative Approaches

The ultimate in insider perspective comes from involving the insiders as coresearchers through collaborative or participatory research. Collaborative forms of fieldwork, participatory action research, and empowerment approaches to evaluation have become sufficiently important and widespread to make *degree of collaboration* a dimension of design choice in qualitative inquiry. Participatory action research has a long and distinguished history (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000; Whyte 1989). Collaborative principles of feminist inquiry include connectedness and equality between researchers and researched, participatory processes that support consciousness-raising and researcher reflexivity, and knowledge generation that contributes to women's liberation and emancipation (Olesen 2000; Guerrero 1999a:15-22; Thompson 1992). In evaluation, Cousins and Earl (1995) have advocated participatory and collaborative approaches to evaluation primarily to increase use of findings. Empowerment evaluation, often using qualitative methods (Fetterman 2000a; Fetterman, Kaftarian, and Wandersman 1996), involves the use of evaluation concepts and techniques to foster self-determination and help people help themselves by learning to study and report on their own issues and concerns.

What these approaches have in common is a style of inquiry in which the researcher or evaluator becomes a facilitator, collaborator, and teacher in support of those engaging in their own inquiry. While the findings from such a participatory process may be

useful, a supplementary agenda is often to increase participants' sense of being in control of, deliberative about, and reflective on their own lives and situations. Chapter 4 discussed these approaches as examples of how qualitative inquiry can be applied in support of organizational or program development and community change.

Degrees of collaboration vary along a continuum. At one end is the solo fieldworker or a team of professionals; what characterizes this end of the continuum is that researchers completely control the inquiry. At the other end are collaborations with people in the setting being studied, sometimes called "coresearchers"; they help design the inquiry, collect data, and are involved in analysis. Along the middle of the continuum are various degrees of partial and periodic (as opposed to continuous) collaboration.

Overt Versus Covert Observations

A traditional concern about the validity and reliability of observational data has been the effects of the observer on what is observed. People may behave quite differently when they know they are being observed versus how they behave naturally when they don't think they're being observed. Thus, the argument goes, covert observations are more likely to capture what is really happening than are overt observations where the people in the setting are aware they are being studied.

Researchers have expressed a range of opinions concerning the ethics and morality of conducting covert research, what Mitchell (1993:23-35) calls "the debate over secrecy." One end of the continuum is represented by Edward Shils (1959), who absolutely opposed all forms of covert research including "any observations of private behavior, however technically feasible, without the explicit

and fully informed permission of the person to be observed." He argued that there should be full disclosure of the purpose of any research project and that even participant observation is "morally obnoxious . . . manipulation" unless the observer makes explicit his or her research questions at the very beginning of the observation (Shils 1959, quoted in Webb et al. 1966:vi).

At the other end of the continuum is the "investigative social research" of Jack Douglas (1976). Douglas argued that conventional anthropological field methods have been based on a consensus view of society that views people as basically cooperative, helpful, and willing to have their points of view understood and shared with the rest of the world. In contrast, Douglas adopted a conflict paradigm of society that led him to believe that any and all covert methods of research should be considered acceptable options in a search for truth.

The investigative paradigm is based on the assumption that profound conflicts of interest, values, feelings and actions pervade social life. It is taken for granted that many of the people one deals with, perhaps all people to some extent, have good reason to hide from others what they are doing and even to lie to them. Instead of trusting people and expecting trust in return, one suspects others and expects others to suspect him. Conflict is the reality of life; suspicion is the guiding principle. . . . It's a war of all and no one gives anyone anything for nothing, especially truth. . . .

All competent adults are assumed to know that there are at least four major problems lying in the way of getting at social reality by asking people what is going on and that these problems must be dealt with if one is to avoid being taken in, duped, deceived, used, put on, fooled, suckered, made the patsy, left holding the bag, fronted out and so on. These four

problems are (1) misinformation, (2) evasions, (3) lies, and (4) fronts. (Douglas 1976:55, 57)

Just as degree of participation in fieldwork turned out to be a continuum of variations rather than an all-or-none proposition, so too is the question of how explicit to be about the purpose of fieldwork. The extent to which participants in a program under study are informed that they are being observed and are told the purpose of the research has varied historically from full disclosure to no disclosure, with a great deal of variation along the middle of this continuum (Junker 1960). Discipline-based ethics statements (e.g., American Psychological Association, American Sociological Association) now generally condemn deceitful and covert research. Likewise, institutional review board (IRB) procedures for the protection of human subjects have severely constrained such methods. They now refuse to approve protocols in which research participants are deceived about the purpose of a study, as was commonly done in early psychological research. One of the more infamous examples was Stanley Milgram's New Haven experiments aimed at studying whether ordinary people would follow the orders of someone in authority by having these ordinary citizens administer what they were told were behavior modification electric shocks to help students learn, shocks that appeared to the unsuspecting citizens to go as high as 450 volts despite the screams and protests heard from supposed students on the other side of a wall. The real purpose of the study, participants later learned, was to replicate Nazi prison guard behavior among ordinary American citizens (Milgram 1974).

IRBs also refuse to approve research in which people are observed and studied without their knowledge or consent, as in the infamous Tuskegee Experiment. For

40 years, physicians and medical researchers, under the auspices of the U.S. Public Health Service, studied untreated syphilis among Black men in and around the county seat of Tuskegee, Alabama, without the informed consent of the men studied, men whose syphilis went untreated so that the progress of the disease could be documented (Jones 1993). Other stories of abuse and neglect by researchers doing covert studies abound. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, schoolboys at the Walter E. Fernald State School in Massachusetts were routinely served breakfast cereal doused with radioactive isotopes, without permission of the boys or their guardians, for the dissertation of a doctoral student in nutritional biochemistry. In the 1960s, the U.S. Army secretly sprayed a potentially hazardous chemical from downtown Minneapolis rooftops onto unsuspecting citizens to find out how toxic materials might disperse during biological warfare. Native American children on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in the Dakotas were used to test an unapproved and experimental hepatitis A vaccine without the knowledge or approval of their parents. In the 1960s and 1970s, scientists tested skin treatments and drugs on prisoners in a Philadelphia county jail without informing them of potential dangers. Doctoral students frustrated by having their fieldwork delayed while they await IRB approval need to remember that they are paying for the sins of their research forebears for whom deception and covert observations were standard ways of doing their work. Those most subject to abuse were often the most vulnerable in society—children, the poor, people of color, the sick, people with little education, women and men incarcerated in prisons and asylums, and children in orphanages or state correctional schools. Anthropological research was com-

missioned and used by colonial administrators to maintain control over indigenous peoples. Protection of human subjects procedures are now an affirmation of our commitment to treat all people with respect. And that is as it should be. But the necessity for such procedures comes out of a past littered with scientific horrors for which those of us engaging in research today may still owe penance. At any rate, we need to lean over backward to be sure that such history is truly behind us—and that means being ever vigilant in fully informing and protecting the people who honor us by agreeing to participate in our research, whether they be homeless mothers (Connolly 2000) or corporate executives (Collins 2001).

However, not all research and evaluation falls under IRB review, so the issue of what type and how much disclosure to make remains a matter of debate, especially where the inquiry seeks to expose the inner workings of cults and extremist groups, or those whose power affects the public welfare, for example, corporations, labor union boards, political parties, and other groups with wealth and/or power. For example, Maurice Punch (1985, 1989, 1997), formerly of the Nijenrode Business School in the Netherlands, has written about the challenges of doing ethnographic studies of corruption in both private and public sector organizations, notably the police.

One classic form of deception in fieldwork involves pretending to share values and beliefs in order to become part of the group being studied. Sociologist Richard Leo carefully disguised his liberal political and social views, instead feigning conservative beliefs, to build trust with police and thereby gain admission to interrogation rooms (Allen 1997:32). Sociologist Leon Festinger (1956) infiltrated a doomsday cult by lying about his profession and pretend-

ing to believe in the cult's prophecies. Sociologist Laud Humphreys (1970) pretended to be gay to gather data for his dissertation on homosexual encounters in public parks. Anthropologist Carolyn Ellis (1986) pretended to be just visiting friends when she studied a Chesapeake Bay fishing culture. Her negative portrayals made their way back to the local people, many of whom were infuriated. She later expressed remorse about her deceptions (Allen 1997).

In traditional scholarly fieldwork, the decision about the extent to which observations would be covert was made by researchers balancing the search for truth against their sense of professional ethics. In evaluation research, the information users for whom the evaluation is done have a stake in what kind of methods are used, so the evaluator alone cannot decide the extent to which observations and evaluation purposes will be fully disclosed. Rather, the complexities of program evaluation mean that there are several levels at which decisions about the covert-overt nature of evaluation observations must be made. Sometimes only the funders of the program or of the evaluation know the full extent and purpose of observations. On occasion, program staff may be informed that evaluators will be participating in the program, but clients will not be so informed. In other cases, a researcher may reveal the purpose and nature of program participation to fellow program participants and ask for their cooperation in keeping the evaluation secret from program staff. On still other occasions, a variety of people intimately associated with the program may be informed of the evaluation, but public officials who are less closely associated with the program may be kept "in the dark" about the fact that observations are under way. Sometimes the situation becomes so complex that the evaluator may lose track of who knows and who doesn't

the evaluation: staff overprotection of and condescending attitudes toward participants.

Based on this and other evaluation experiences, I recommend full and complete disclosure. People are seldom really deceived or reassured by false or partial explanations—at least not for long. Trying to run a ruse or scam is simply too risky and adds to evaluator stress while holding the possibility of undermining the evaluation if (and usually when) the ruse becomes known. Program participants, over time, will tend to judge evaluators first and foremost as people not as evaluators.

The nature of the questions being studied in any particular evaluation will have a primary effect on the decision about who will be told that an evaluation is under way. In formative evaluations where staff members and/or program participants are anxious to have information that will help them improve their program, the quality of the data gathered may be enhanced by overtly soliciting the cooperation of everyone associated with the program. Indeed, the ultimate acceptance and usefulness of formative information may depend on such prior disclosure and agreement that a formative evaluation is appropriate. On the one hand, where program funders have reason to believe that a program is corrupt, abusive, incompetently administered, and/or highly negative in impact on clients, it may be decided that an external, covert evaluation is necessary to find out what is really happening in the program. Under such conditions, my preference for full disclosure may be neither prudent nor practical. On the other hand, Whyte (1984) has argued that "in a community setting, maintaining a covert role is generally out of the question" (p. 31).

Finally, there is the related issue of confidentiality. Those who advocate covert research usually do so with the condition that

reports conceal names, locations, and other identifying information so that the people who have been observed will be protected from harm or punitive action. Because the basic researcher is interested in truth rather than action, it is easier to protect the identity of informants or study settings when doing scholarly research. In evaluation research, however, while the identity of who said what may be possible to keep secret, it is seldom possible to conceal the identity of a program, and doing so may undermine the utility of the findings.

Evaluators and decision makers will have to resolve these issues in each case in accordance with their own consciences, evaluation purposes, political realities, and ethical sensitivities.

Variations in Duration of Observations

Another important dimension along which observational studies vary is the length of time devoted to data gathering. In the anthropological tradition of field research, a participant observer would expect to spend six months at a minimum, and often years, living in the culture being observed. The fieldwork of Napoleon Chagnon (1992) among the Yanomami Indians in the rain forest at the borders of Venezuela and Brazil spanned a quarter century. To develop a holistic view of an entire culture or subculture takes a great deal of time, especially when, as in the case of Chagnon, he was documenting changes in tribal life and threats to the continued existence of these once-isolated people. The effects of his long-term involvement on the people he studied became controversial (Geertz 2001; Tierney 2000a, 2000b), a matter we shall take up later. The point here is that fieldwork in basic and applied social science aims to unveil the interwoven complexities and funda-

mental patterns of social life—actual, perceived, constructed, and analyzed. Such studies take a long time.

Educational researcher Alan Peshkin offers a stellar example of a committed fieldworker who lived for periods of time in varied settings in order to study the intersections between schools and communities. He did fieldwork in a Native American community; in a high school in a stable, multiethnic mid-sized city in California; in rural, east-central Illinois; in a fundamentalist Christian school; and in a private, residential school for elites (Peshkin 1986, 1997, 2000b). To collect data, he and his wife Maryann lived for at least a year in and with the community that he was studying. They shopped locally, attended religious services, and developed close relationships with civic leaders as well as teachers and students.

In contrast, evaluation and action research typically involve much shorter durations in keeping with their more modest aims: generating useful information for action. To be useful, evaluation findings must be timely. Decision makers cannot wait for years while fieldworkers sift through mountains of field notes. Many evaluations are conducted under enormous pressures of time and limited resources. Thus, the duration of observations will depend to a considerable extent on the time and resources available in relation to the information needs and decision deadlines of primary evaluation users. Later in this chapter we'll include reflections from an evaluator about what it was like being a part-time, in-and-out observer of a program for eight months, but only present 6 hours a week out of the program's 40-hour week.

On the other hand, sustained and ongoing evaluation research may provide annual findings while, over years of study, accumulating an archive of data that serves as a source of more basic research into human

Sometimes an entire segment of a program may be of sufficiently short duration that the evaluator can participate in the complete program. The leadership retreat we observed lasted 6 days, plus three 1-day follow-up sessions during the subsequent year.

The critical point is that the length of time during which observations take place depends on the purpose of the study and the questions being asked, not some ideal about what a typical participant observation must necessarily involve. Field studies may be massive efforts with a team of people participating in multiple settings in order to do comparisons over several years. At times, then, and for certain studies, long-term fieldwork is essential. At other times and for other purposes, as in the case of short-term formative evaluations, it can be helpful for program staff to have an evaluator provide feedback based on just one hour of onlooker observation at a staff meeting, as I have also done.

My response to students who ask me how long they have to observe a program to do a good evaluation follows the line of thought developed by Abraham Lincoln during one of the Douglas-Lincoln debates. In an obvious reference to the difference in stature between Douglas and Lincoln, a heckler asked, "Tell us, Mr. Lincoln, how long do you think a man's legs ought to be?"

Lincoln replied, "Long enough to reach the ground."

Fieldwork should last long enough to get the job done—to answer the research questions being asked and fulfill the purpose of the study.

Variations in Observational Focus

The preceding sections have discussed how observations vary in the extent to

which the observer participates in the setting being studied, the tension between insider versus outsider perspectives, the extent to which the purpose of the study is made explicit, and the duration of the observations. A major factor affecting each of these other dimensions is the scope or focus of the study or evaluation. The scope can be broad, encompassing virtually all aspects of the setting, or it can be narrow, involving a look at only some small part of what is happening.

Parameswaran (2001) wanted to interview young women in India who read Western romance novels. Thus, her fieldwork had a very narrow focus. But to contextualize what she learned from interviews, she sought "active involvement in my informants' lives beyond their romance reading." How did she do this?

I ate snacks and lunch at cafes with groups of women, went to the movies, dined with them at their homes, and accompanied them on shopping trips. I joined women's routine conversations during break times and interviewed informants at a range of everyday sites, such as college grounds, homes, and restaurants. I visited used-book vendors, bookstores, and lending libraries with several readers and observed social interactions between library owners and young women. To gain insight into the multidimensional relationship between women's romance reading and their experiences with everyday social discourse about romance readers, I interviewed young women's parents, siblings, teachers, bookstore managers, and owners of the lending libraries they frequented. (p. 75)

The tradition of ethnographic fieldwork has emphasized the importance of understanding whole cultural systems. The various subsystems of a society are seen as interdependent parts so that the economic

system, the cultural system, the political system, the kinship system, and other specialized subsystems could only be understood in relation to each other. In reality, fieldwork and observations have tended to focus on a particular part of the society or culture because of specific investigator interests and the need to allocate the most time to those things that the researcher considered most important. Thus, a particular study might present an overview of a particular culture but then go on to report in greatest detail about the religious system of that culture.

In evaluating programs, a broad range of possible foci makes choosing a specific focus challenging. One way of thinking about focus options involves distinguishing various program processes sequentially: (1) processes by which participants enter a program (the outreach, recruitment, and intake components); (2) processes of orientation and socialization into the program (the initiation period); (3) the basic activities that comprise program implementation over the course of the program (the service delivery system); and (4) the activities that go on around program termination, including follow-up activities and client impacts over time. It would be possible to observe only one of these program components, some combination of components, or all of the components together. Which parts of the

program and how many are studied will clearly affect such issues as the extent to which the observer is a participant, who will know about the evaluation's purpose, and the duration of observations.

Chapter 5 discussed how decisions about the focus and scope of a study involve trade-offs between breadth and depth. The very first trade-off comes in framing the research questions to be studied. The problem is to determine the extent to which it is desirable and useful to study one or a few questions in great depth or to study more questions but each in less depth. Moreover, in emergent designs, the focus can change over time.

Dimensions Along Which Fieldwork Varies: An Overview

We've examined five dimensions that can be used to describe some of the primary variations in fieldwork. Those dimensions, discussed in the previous sections, are graphically summarized in Exhibit 6.1. These dimensions can be used to help design observational studies and make decisions about the parameters of fieldwork. They can also be used to organize the methods section of a report or dissertation in order to document how research or evaluation fieldwork actually unfolded.

5 What to Observe: A Sensitizing Framework

J keep six honest serving men.
They taught me all I knew:

Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.²

—Rudyard Kipling

EXHIBIT 6.1 Dimensions Showing Fieldwork Variations

1. Role of the observer					
Full participant in the setting	Part participant/part observer	Onlooker observer (spectator)			
2. Insider versus outsider perspective					
Insider (emic) perspective dominant	Balance	Outsider (etic) perspective dominant			
3. Who conducts the inquiry					
Solo researchers, teams of professionals	Variations in collaboration and participatory research	People in the setting being studied			
4. Disclosure of the observer's role to others					
Overt: Full disclosure	Selective disclosure	Covert: No disclosure			
5. Duration of observations and fieldwork					
Short, single observation (e.g., 1 site, 1 hour)	Ongoing over time	Long-term, multiple observations (e.g., months, years)			
6. Focus of observations					
Narrow focus: Single element	Evolving, emergent	Broad focus: Holistic view			

NASA space scientist David Morrison (1999) has noted that in astronomy, geology, and planetary science, observation precedes theory generation "and the journals in these fields never require the authors to state a 'hypothesis' in order to publish their results" (p. 8).