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 to 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.

What to Observe: A Sensitizing Framework

I 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).

> A recent example is the famous Hubble Space Telescope Deep Field in which the telescope obtained a single exposure of many days duration of one small field in an unremarkable part of the sky. The objective was to see fainter and farther than ever before, and thus to find out what the universe was like early in its history. No hypothesis was required—just the unique opportunity to look where no one had ever looked before and see what nature herself had to tell us.
>
> In many other sciences the culture demands that funding proposals and published papers be written in terms of formulating and testing a hypothesis. But I wonder if this is really the way the scientific process works, or is this just an artificial structure imposed for the sake of tradition. (Morrison 1999:8)

Part of the value of open-ended naturalistic observations is the opportunity to see what there is to see without the blinders of hypotheses and other preconceptions. Pure observation. As Morrison put it so elegantly, just the unique opportunity to look where no one has ever looked before and see what the world has to show us.

That's the ideal. However, it's not possible to observe everything. The human observer is not a movie camera, and even a movie camera has to be pointed in the right direction to capture what is happening. For both the human observer and the camera there must be focus. In fieldwork, this focus is provided by the study design and the nature of the questions being asked. Once in the field, however, the observer must somehow organize the complex stimuli experienced so that observing that becomes and remains manageable.

Experienced observers often use "sensitizing concepts" to orient fieldwork. Qualitative sociologist and symbolic interactionist Herbert Blumer (1954) is credited with originating the idea of the sensitizing concept as a guide to fieldwork with special attention to the words and meanings that are prevalent among the people being studied. More generally, however, "a sensitizing concept is a starting point in thinking about the class of data of which the social researcher has no definite idea and provides an initial guide to her research" (van den Hoonaard 1997:2). Sensitizing concepts in the social sciences include loosely operationalized notions such as victim, stress, stigma, and learning organization that can provide some initial direction to a study as a fieldworker inquires into how the concept is given meaning in a particular place or set of circumstances being studied (Schwandt 2001).

Rudyard Kipling's poem about his "six honest serving men," quoted above, constitutes a fundamental and insightful sensitizing framework identifying the central elements of good description. In social science, "group process" is a general sensitizing concept as is the focus on outcomes in evaluation. Kinship, leadership, socialization, power, and similar notions are sensitizing in that they alert us to ways of organizing observations and making decisions about what to record. Qualitative methodologist Norman Denzin (1978a) has captured the essence of how sensitizing concepts guide fieldwork:

> The observer moves from sensitizing concepts to the immediate world of social experience and permits that world to shape and modify his conceptual framework. In this way he moves continually between the realm of more general social theory and the worlds of native people. Such an approach recognizes that social phenomena, while displaying regularities, vary by time, space, and circumstance. The observer, then, looks for repeatable regularities. He uses ritual patterns of dress and body-spacing as indicators of self-image. He takes special languages, codes, and dialects as indicators of group boundaries. He studies his subject's prized social objects as indicators of prestige, dignity, and esteem hierarchies. He studies moments of interrogation and derogation as indicators of socialization strategies. He attempts to enter his subject's closed world of interaction so as to examine the character of private versus public acts and attitudes. (p. 9)

The notion of "sensitizing concepts" reminds us that observers do not enter the field with a completely blank slate. While the inductive nature of qualitative inquiry emphasizes the importance of being open to whatever one can learn, some way of organizing the complexity of experience is virtually a prerequisite for perception itself. Exhibit 6.2 presents examples of common sensitizing concepts for program evaluation and organizational studies. These common program concepts and organizational dimensions constitute ways of breaking the complexities of planned human interventions into distinguishable, manageable, and observable elements. The examples in Exhibit 6.2 are by no means exhaustive of evaluation and organizational sensitizing concepts, but they illustrate oft-used ways of organizing an agenda for inquiry. These concepts serve to guide initial observations as the evaluator or organizational analyst watches for incidents, interactions, and conversations that illuminate these sensitizing concepts in a particular program setting or organization. Highly experienced evaluators and organizational consultants have internalized some kind of sensitizing framework like this to the point where they would not need to list these concepts in a formal written design. Less experienced researchers and dissertation students will usually benefit from preparing a formal list of major sensitizing concepts in the formal design and then using those concepts to help organize and guide fieldwork, at least initially.

A note of caution about sensitizing concepts: When they become part of popular culture, they can lose much of their original meaning. Philip Tuwaletstiwa, a Hopi geographer, relates the story of a tourist cruising through Native American areas of the Southwest. He overheard the tourist, "all agog at half-heard tales about Hopi land," ask his wife, "Where are the *power places?*"

"Tell her that's where we plug-in TV," he said (quoted in Milius 1998:92).

Overused sensitizing concepts can become desensitizing.

Sources of Data

Poet David Wagoner (1999) tells those observing the modern world and afraid of being lost to follow the advice Native American elders gave the young when they were afraid of being lost in the forest:

Lost

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes
beside you
Are not lost. Where you are is called
Here,
And you must trust it as a powerful
stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and
be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you.
If you leave it, you may come back
again, saying Here.
No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on
you,
You are surely lost. Stand still. The
forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find
you.[3]

EXHIBIT 6.2 Examples of Sensitizing Concepts

Program Evaluation	*Organizational Dimensions*
Context	Mission/vision language
Goals	Centralization/decentralization of participation and decision making
Inputs	External boundary relationships: Open/closed
Recruitment	Routinness/nonroutinness of work, products, decisions
Intake	Leadership
Implementation	Communication patterns
Processes	Organizational culture
Output	Hierarchy: Layered/flat
Outcomes	Authority patterns
Products	Formal/informal networks
Impacts	Rewards/punishments, incentives/disincentives
Program theory	Success and failure messages/stories
Logic model	Degree of integration
Perceived	Competition/cooperation
Assets	
Barriers	
Strengths	
Weaknesses	
Incentives	
Disincentives	

The *what* and *how* of qualitative inquiry are closely linked. Sources of data are derived from inquiry questions. Knowing what we want to illuminate helps us determine sources of data for that illumination. The examples and illustrations that follow derive from and build on the sensitizing framework for program evaluation. Interspersed with this presentation of sources of evaluation data are examples of how to collect observational data. These strategies apply to other inquiry settings, but to provide coherent and in-depth illustrations, the examples that follow focus on program evaluation.

The Setting

Describing a setting, like a program setting, begins with the physical environment within which the program takes place. The description of the program setting should be sufficiently detailed to permit the reader to visualize that setting. In writing a program description, the observer, unlike the novelist, should avoid interpretive adjectives except as they appear in quotes from participants about their reactions to and perceptions of that environment. Such adjectives as *comfortable, beautiful, drab,* and *stimulating* interpret rather than describe—and interpret vaguely at that. More purely descriptive adjectives include

colors ("a room painted blue with a blackboard at one end"),

space ("a 40-foot-by-20-foot classroom with windows on one side"), and

purpose ("a library, the walls lined with books and tables in the center").

Beginners can practice learning to write descriptively by sharing a description of a setting observed with a couple of people and asking them if they can visualize the setting described. Another helpful exercise involves two people observing the same environment and exchanging their descriptions, watching in particular for the use of interpretive adjectives instead of descriptive ones. Vivid description provides sufficient information that the reader does not have to speculate at what is meant. For example, simply reporting "a crowded room" requires interpretation. Contrast with this:

> The meeting room had a three-person couch across one side, six chairs along the adjoining walls next to the couch, and three chairs along the wall facing the couch, which included the door. With 20 people in the room, all standing, there was very little space between people. Several participants were overheard to say, "This room is really crowded."

Such descriptive writing requires attention to detail and discipline to avoid vague, interpretive phrases. But such writing can also be dull. Metaphors and analogies can enliven and enrich descriptions, helping readers connect through shared understandings and giving them a better *feel* for the environment being described. I once evaluated a wilderness education program that included time at the Grand Canyon. Exhibit 6.3 presents my feeble attempt to capture in words our first view of the Grand Canyon. Notice the metaphors that run through the description. Of course, this is one of those instances where a picture would be worth a mountain of words, which is why qualitative fieldwork increasingly includes photography and videography. This excerpt aims at offering *a sense of the physical environment* more than it offers a literal description because unless one has been there or seen pictures, the landscape is outside ordinary experience.

The physical environment of a setting can be important to what happens in that environment. The way the walls look in rooms, the amount of space available, how the space is used, the nature of the lighting, how people are organized in the space, and the interpretive reactions of program participants to the physical setting can be important information about both program implementation and the effects of the program on participants.

A common mistake among observers is to take the physical environment for granted. Thus, an evaluator may report that the program took place in "a school." The evaluator may have a mental image of "school" that matches what was observed, but schools vary considerably in size, appearance, and neighborhood setting. Even more so, the interiors of schools vary considerably. The same can be said for criminal justice settings, health settings, community mental health programs, and any other human service activity.

EXHIBIT 6.3 Example of Combining Description and Metaphor to Provide a Sense of Place

Context for a Wilderness Program: First View From Bright Angel Point at the Grand Canyon

We followed an asphalt path from the lodge a quarter mile to Bright Angel Point, perhaps the most popular tourist site at the Grand Canyon because of its relatively easy accessibility. With cameras aimed in all directions at the spectacular panorama, in a sea of domestic accents and foreign tongues, we waited our turn at the edge to behold the magnificent rock temples of Ottoman Amphitheater: Deva, Brahma, Zoroaster and, in the distance, Thor. Each rises a half mile above the undulating grayness of the stark Tonto Platform defining the eight-mile descent of Bright Angel Canyon, a narrow slit hiding the inner gorge that looks like it had been drawn in black ink to outline the base of the temples. Each begins as sheer Redwall that forms a massive foundation supporting a series of sloping sedimentary rock terraces, the Supai. These sweeping terraces, spotted green with sparse desert vegetation, point upward like arrow feathers to a white sandstone pedestal, the Coconino. A dark red pinnacle of Hermit shale uniquely crowns each temple. Eons of erosion have sculpted dramatic variations in every aspect save one: their common geologic history. I studied each separately, wanting to fix in my mind the differences between them, but the shared symmetry of strata melded them into a single, massive formation, a half mile high and many miles around. Behind me I heard a participant say softly to no one in particular, almost under her breath, "It's too awesome. I feel overwhelmed."

SOURCE: Adapted from Patton (1999a).

During site visits to early childhood education programs, we found a close association between the attractiveness of the facility (child-made decorations and colorful posters on the walls, well-organized learning materials, orderly teacher area) and other program attributes (parent involvement, staff morale, clarity of the program's goals and theory of action). An attractive, well-ordered environment corresponded to an engaging, well-ordered program. In observing as well as conducting workshops, I have noted how the arrangement of chairs affects participation. It is typically much easier to generate discussion when chairs are in a circle rather than in lecture style. The dim lighting of many hotel conference rooms seems to literally drain energy from people sitting in those rooms for long periods of time. Physical environments clearly affect people and programs.

Variations in the settings for a wilderness training program for which I served as participant observer provide an interesting example of how physical environments affect a program. The explicit purpose of holding the "field conferences" in the wilderness was to remove people from their everyday settings in largely urban environments surrounded by human-made buildings and the paraphernalia of modern industrial society. Yet, wilderness environments are no more uniform than the environments of human service programs. During the yearlong program, participants were exposed to four different wilderness environments: the autumn forest in the Gila wilderness of New Mexico; the rough terrain of Arizona's Kofa Mountains in winter; the muddy, flooding San Juan River in the canyon lands of Utah during the spring; and among the magnificent rock formations of the Grand Canyon in summer, a desert environment. One focus of the evaluation, then, was to observe how participants responded to the opportunities and constraints presented by these different environments: forest, mountains, canyon-lined river, and Grand Canyon desert.

In addition, weather and seasonal differences accentuated variations among these environments. Program activities were clearly affected by the extent to which there was rain, cold, wind, and shelter. In the program's theory, weather uncertainties were expected to be a natural part of the program, offering natural challenges for the group to deal with. But the program theory also called for participants to engage deeply with each other during evening group discussions. During one 10-day winter field conference that was unusually cold and wet, participants were miserable, and it became increasingly difficult to carry on group discussions, thus reducing considerably the amount of group process time available and rushing the interactions that did occur because of participants' discomfort. Program staff learned that they needed to anticipate more clearly the possible variations in physical environments, plan for those variations, and include the participants in that planning so as to increase their commitment to continuing the process under difficult physical conditions.

The Human, Social Environment

Just as physical environments vary, so too do social environments. The ways in which human beings interact create social-ecological constellations that affect how participants behave toward each other in those environments. Rudolf Moos (1975) described the social-ecological view of programs as follows:

> The social climate perspective assumes that environments have unique "personalities," just like people. Personality tests assess personality traits or needs and provide information about the characteristic ways in which people behave. Social environments can be similarly portrayed with a great deal of accuracy and detail. Some people are more supportive than others. Likewise, some social environments are more supportive than others. Some people feel a strong need to control others. Similarly, some social environments are extremely rigid, autocratic, and controlling. Order, clarity, and structure are important to many people. Correspondingly, many social environments strongly emphasize order, clarity, and control. (p. 4)

In describing the social environment, the observer looks for the ways in which people organize themselves into groups and subgroups. Patterns and frequency of interactions, the direction of communication patterns (from staff to participants and participants to staff), and changes in these patterns tell us things about the social environment. How people group together can be illuminative and important. All-male versus all-female groupings, male-female interactions, and interactions among people with different background characteristics, racial identities, and/or ages alert the observer to patterns in the social ecology of the program.

Decision-making patterns can be a particularly important part of a program's social environment. Who makes decisions about the activities that take place? To what extent are decisions made openly, so that participants are aware of the decision-making process? How are decisions by staff communicated to participants? Answers to these questions are an important part of the description of a program's decision environment.

An observer's descriptions of a social environment will not necessarily be the same as the perceptions of that environment expressed by participants. Nor is it likely that all participants will perceive the setting's human climate in the same way. At all times it is critical that the observer record participants' comments in quotation marks, indicating the source—who said what?—so as to keep perceptions of participants separate from the observer's or evaluator's own descriptions and interpretations.

Historical Perspectives

Historical information can shed important light on the social environment. The history of a program, community, or organization is an important part of the context for research. Distinguished qualitative sociologist William Foote Whyte, sometimes called the father of sociological field research, has reflected on how he came to value historical research as a critical part of his fieldwork.

> When we began our Peruvian research program, I viewed history as having little value for understanding the current scene. I thought I was only being sympathetic to the interests of our Peruvian researchers in suggesting that they gather historical data on each village for the last 50 years.
>
> Fortunately, the Peruvians refused to accept the 50-year limit and in some cases probed up to 500 years in the history of villages or areas. Much of these data on rural communities would be of interest only to historians. However, understanding the paradox of the Mantaro Valley required us to go back to the conquest of Peru, and, in the Chancay Valley, we traced the beginnings of the differentiation of Huayopampa from Pacaros back more than a century. (Whyte 1984:153)

> **OBSERVING NATURE**
>
> *Observing animals and nature poses special challenges in overcoming the tendency to attribute human characteristics to flora and fauna. Harvard sociobiologist E. O. Wilson pulled no punches in assessing the consequences: "No intellectual vice is more crippling then defiantly self-indulgent anthropocentrism" (quoted by Leo Marx 1999:60).*

Documenting and understanding the context of a program will require delving into its history. How was the program created and initially funded? Who were the original people targeted for program services, and how have target populations changed over time? To what extent and in what ways have goals and intended outcomes changed over time? What have staffing patterns been over time? How has the program's governance (board) been involved at various stages in the program's history? What crises has the program endured? If the program is embedded within a larger organizational context, what is the history of that organization in relation to the program? How has the larger political and economic environment changed over time, and how have those changes affected program development? What are the stories people tell about the program's history? These kinds of questions frame inquiry into the program's history to illuminate context.

In the 1990s, I evaluated a "free high school" that had been created during the struggles and turmoil of the 1960s. Little about the program's current programming could be understood outside the context of its historical emergence. The school's image of itself, its curriculum, and its policies had been handed down and adapted from that intense period of early development. Doing fieldwork in the 1990s could only be done by traversing the memories and legends of the school's historical emergence in the 1960s.

Planned Program Implementation Activities and Formal Interactions

Most evaluations focus at least some observations on planned program activities. What goes on in the program? What do participants and staff do? What is it like to be a participant? These are the kinds of questions evaluators bring to the program setting to document program implementation.

Build observations around activities that have a kind of unity about them: a beginning, some middle point, and a closure point—such things as a class session, a counseling session, meal time in the residential facility, a meeting of some kind, a home visit in an outreach program, a consultation, or a registration procedure. Attending to sequence illustrates how the inquiry progresses over the course of an observation. Initially, the observer will focus on how the activity is introduced or begun. Who is present at the beginning? What exactly was said? How did participants respond or react to what was said?

These kinds of basic descriptive questions guide the evaluator throughout the full sequence of observation. *Who* is involved? *What* is being done and said by staff and participants? *How* do they go about what they do? *Where* do activities occur? *When* do things happen? What are the variations in how participants engage in planned activities? How does it feel to be engaged in this activity? (The observer records his or her own feelings as part of the observation.) How do behaviors and feelings change over the course of the activity?

Finally, the observer looks for closure points. What are the signals that a particular activity is being ended? Who is present at that time? What is said? How do participants react to the ending of the activity? How is the completion of this unit of activity related to other program activities and future plans?

Each unit of activity is observed and treated as a self-contained event for the purpose of managing field notes. The observation of a single session of the early childhood parent education program presented in Chapter 1 is an example. Each observed event or activity can be thought of as a mini-case write-up of a discrete incident, activity, interaction, or event. During analysis, one looks across these discrete units-of-activity cases for patterns and themes, but during the initial stages of fieldwork the observer will be kept busy just trying to capture self-contained units of activity without worrying yet about looking for patterns across activities.

Observing and documenting formal program activities will constitute a central element in evaluating planned program implementation, but to fully understand a program and its effects on participants, observations should not be restricted to formal, planned activities. The next section discusses observation of the things that go on between and around formal, planned program activities.

Informal Interactions and Unplanned Activities

If observers put away their seeing and observing selves as soon as a planned, formal activity ends, they will miss a great deal of data. Some programs build in "free" or unstructured time between activities, with the clear recognition that such periods provide opportunities for participants to assimilate what has occurred during formal programmatic activities as well as to provide participants with necessary breathing space. Rarely, if ever, can a program or institution plan every moment of participants' time.

During periods of informal interaction and unplanned activity, it can be particularly difficult to organize observations because people are likely to be milling around, coming and going, moving in and out of small groups, with some sitting alone, some writing, some seeking refreshments, and otherwise engaging in a full range of what may appear to be random behaviors. How, then, can the evaluator observer collect data during such a time?

This scenario illustrates beautifully the importance of staying open to the data and doing opportunity sampling. One can't anticipate all the things that might emerge during unplanned program time, so the observer watches, listens, and looks for opportunities to deepen observations, recording what people do, the nature of informal interactions (e.g., what subgroups are in evidence), and, in particular, what people are saying to each other. This last point is particularly important. During periods of unplanned activity, participants have the greatest opportunity to exchange views and to talk with each other about what they are experiencing in the program. In some cases, the evaluator will simply listen in on conversations or there may be opportunities to conduct informal interviews, either with a single participant in natural conversation or with some small group of people, asking normal, conversational questions:

> So what did you think of what went on this morning?
>
> Was it clear to you what they were trying to get at?
>
> What did you think of the session today?
>
> How do you think what went on today fits into this whole thing that we're involved in?

Such questioning should be done in an easy, conversational manner so as not to be intrusive or so predictable that every time someone sees you coming they know what questions you're going to ask. "Get ready, here comes the evaluator with another endless set of questions." Also, when doing informal, conversational interviewing, be sure that you are acting in accordance with ethical guidelines regarding informed consent and confidentiality. (See the earlier discussion in this chapter about overt versus covert fieldwork.)

How something is said should be recorded along with what is said. At a morning break in the second day of a two-day workshop, I joined the other men in the restroom. As the men lined up to use the facilities, the first man to urinate said loudly, "Here's what I think of this program." As each man finished he turned to the man behind him and said, "Your turn to piss on the program." This spontaneous group reaction spoke volumes more than answers to formal interview questions and provided much greater depth of expression than checking "very dissatisfied" on an evaluation questionnaire.

Everything that goes on in or around the program is data. The fact that none of the participants talk about a session when it is over is data. The fact that people immediately split in different directions when a session is over is data. The fact that people talk about personal interests and share gossip that has nothing to do with the program is data. In many programs, the most significant participant learnings occur during unstructured time as a result of interactions with other participants. To capture a holistic view of the program, the evaluator observer must stay alert to what happens during these informal periods. While others are on break, the observer is still working. No breaks for the dedicated field-worker! Well, not really. You've got to pace yourself and take care of yourself or your observations will deteriorate into mush. But you get the idea. You may be better off taking a break during part of a formal session time so you can work (collect data) while others are on break.

As happens in many programs, the participants in the wilderness education program I was observing/evaluating began asking for more free, unstructured time. When we weren't hiking or doing camp chores, a lot of time was spent in formal discussions and group activities. Participants wanted more free time to journal. Some simply wanted more time to reflect. Most of all, they wanted more time for informal interactions with other participants. I respected the privacy of one-to-one interactions when I observed them and would never attempt to eavesdrop. I would, however, watch for such interactions and, judging body language and facial expressions, I would speculate when serious interpersonal exchanges were taking place. I would then look for natural opportunities to engage each of those participants in conversational interviews, telling them I had noticed the intensity of their interaction and inquiring whether they were willing to share what had happened and what significance they attached to the interaction. Most appreciated my role in documenting the program's unfolding and its effects on participants and were open to sharing. It was on the basis of those informal interviews and observations that I provided formative feedback to staff about the importance of free time and helped alleviate the feeling among some staff members that they had a responsibility to plan and account for every moment during the program.

Participant observation necessarily combines observing and informal interviewing. Observers need to be disciplined about not assuming they know the meaning to participants of what they observe without checking with those participants. During one period of unstructured time in the wilderness program, following a fairly intensive group activity in which a great deal of interpersonal sharing had taken place, I decided to pay particular attention to one of the older men in the group who had resisted involvement. Throughout the week he had taken every available opportunity to make it known that he was unimpressed with the program and its potential for impact on him. When the session ended, he immediately walked over to his backpack, pulled out his writing materials, and went off to a quiet spot where he could write. He continued writing, completely absorbed, until dinnertime an hour later. No one interrupted him. With his legs folded, his notebook in his lap, and his head and shoulders bent over the notebook, he gave off clear signals that he was involved, concentrating and working on something to which he was giving a great deal of effort.

I suspected as I watched that he was venting his rage and dissatisfaction with the program. I tried to figure out how I might read what he had written. I was so intrigued that I momentarily even considered covert means of getting my hands on his notebook, but quickly dismissed such unethical invasion of his privacy. Instead, I looked for a natural opportunity to initiate a conversation about his writing. During the evening meal around the campfire, I moved over next to him, made some small talk about the weather, and then began the following conversation:

"You know, in documenting experiences people are having, I'm trying to track some of the different things folks are doing. The staff have encouraged people to keep journals and do writing, and I noticed that you were writing fairly intensely before dinner. If you're willing to share, it would be helpful for me to know how you see the writing fitting into your whole experience with the program."

He hesitated, moved his food about in his bowl a little bit, and then said, "I'm not sure about the program or how it fits in or any of that, but I will tell you what I was writing. I was writing . . . ," and he hesitated because his voice cracked, "a letter to my teenage son trying to tell him how I feel about him and make contact with him about some things. I don't know if I'll give the letter to him. The letter may have been more for me than for him. But the most important thing that's been happening for me during this week is the time to think about my family and how important it is to me and I haven't been having a very good relationship with my son. In fact, it's been pretty shitty and so I wrote him a letter. That's all."

This short conversation revealed a very different side of this man and an important impact of the program on his personal and family life. We had several more conversations along these lines, and he agreed to be a case example of the family impacts of the program. Until that time, impacts on family had not even been among the expected or intended outcomes of the program. It turned out to be a major area of impact for a number of participants.

The Native Language of the Program

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;
That is, the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth the forms of things unknown,
The poet's pen turns them to shapes
And gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

—William Shakespeare,
A Midsummer Night's Dream, Act V, scene 1

As noted in Chapter 2, the Whorf hypothesis (Schultz 1991) alerts us to the power of language to shape our perceptions and experiences. As an insurance investigator, Benjamin Whorf was assigned to look into explosions in warehouses. He discovered that truck drivers were entering "empty" warehouses smoking cigarettes and cigars. The warehouses often contained invisible, but highly flammable gases. He interviewed truckers and found that they associated the word *empty* with *harmless* and acted accordingly. Whorf's job, in Shakespeare's terms, was to turn the truckers' perception of "airy nothing" into the shape of possible danger.

An anthropological axiom insists that one cannot understand another culture without understanding the language of the people in that culture. Language organizes our world for us by shaping what we see, perceive, and pay attention to. The things for which people have special words tell others what is important to that culture. Thus, as students learn in introductory anthropology, Eskimos have many words for snow and Arabs have many words for camel. Likewise, the artist has many words for red and different kinds of brushes.

Roderick Nash (1986), in his classic study *Wilderness and the American Mind,* traces how changing European American perceptions of "wilderness" has affected at the deepest levels our cultural, economic, and political perspectives on deserts, forests, canyons, and rivers. He traced the very idea of wilderness to the eighth-century heroic epic character Beowulf, whose bravery was defined by his courage in entering the *wildeor*—a place of wild and dangerous beasts, dark and foreboding forests, and untamed, primordial spirits. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, wilderness came to connote a place of uncontrolled evil that needed to be tamed and civilized, while Eastern cultures and religions fostered love of wilderness rather than fear. Nash credits the Enlightenment with offering new ways of thinking about wilderness—and new language to shape that changed thinking.

Moving from the wilderness to the interior territory of organizations, agencies, and programs, language still shapes experience and is therefore an important focus during fieldwork. Programs develop their own language to describe the problems they deal with in their work. Educators who work with learning disabled students have a complex system of language to distinguish different degrees and types of retardation, a language that changes as cultural and political sensitivities change. People in criminal justice generate language for distinguishing types of offenders or "perps" (perpetrators). Fieldwork involves learning the "native language" of the setting or program being studied and attending to variations in connotations and situational use. The field notes and reports of the observer should include the exact language used by participants to communicate the flavor and meaning of "native" program language.

Language was especially important in the wilderness education program I evaluated. These were highly verbal people, well educated, reflective and articulate, who spent a lot of program time in group discussions. Program staff understood how words can shape experiences. They wanted participants to view the time in the wilderness as a professional development learning experience not a vacation, so staff called each week in the wilderness a "field conference." They hoped participants would see the program as a "conference" held in the "field." Despite the determined efforts of staff, however, the participants never adopted this language. Almost universally they referred to the weeks in the wilderness as "trips." During the second "field conference" the staff capitulated. Interestingly enough, that capitulation coincided with negative reactions by participants to some logistical inadequacies, unsuccessful program activities, and bad weather, all of which undercut the "conference" emphasis. Staff language reflected that change.

Other language emerged that illuminated participants' experiences. One of the participants expressed the hope of "detoxifying" in the wilderness. He viewed his return to his everyday world as "poisonous retoxification." The group immediately adopted this language of detoxification and retoxification to refer to "wilderness time" versus ordinary "urban civilization time," ultimately shortening the words to *detox* and *retox*. This language came to permeate the program's culture.

The discussions in the wilderness often reflected the physical environment in which program activities took place. Participants became skilled at creating analogies and metaphors to contrast their urban work lives with their wilderness experiences. After backpacking all day, participants could be heard talking about learning how to "pace myself in my work," or "shifting the burdens of responsibilities that I carry so that the load is more evenly balanced" (a reference to the experience of adjusting the weight of the backpack). In the mountains, after rock climbing, participants referred to "the danger in taking risks at work without support" (a reference to the *balay* system of climbing where someone supports the climber with a safety rope below). One discussion focused on how to "find toeholds and handholds" to bring about change back home, "to get on top of the steep wall of resistance in my institution." They even assigned numbers to degrees of back-home institutional resistance corresponding to the numbers used to describe the degree of difficulty of various rock climbs. On the river, participant language was filled with phrases like "going with the flow," "learning to monitor professional development like you read and monitor the current," and "trying to find my way out of the eddies of life."

Because of the power of language to shape our perceptions and experiences, most participants wanted to know the names of the rock formations, winding canyons, and river rapids we encountered, while others, following *Desert Solitaire* author Edward Abbey (1968), set for themselves the goal of suppressing the human tendency to personify natural forms. Thus began a sustained personal interest in how names in the wilderness shaped our experiences there (Patton and Patton 2001).

When I took my son into the Grand Canyon for a "coming of age" initiation experience (Patton 1999a), he reacted to the problem of finding words for that awesome environment by making up words. For example, upon seeing the Canyon for the very first time he whispered, "*Bue düden*," which became our way of describing things too beautiful and awesome for ordinary words.

Capturing the precise language of participants honors the emic tradition in anthropology: recording participants' own understandings of their experiences. Observers must learn the language of participants in the setting or program they are observing in order to faithfully represent participants in their own terms and be true to their worldview.

Nonverbal Communication

Social and behavioral scientists have reported at length the importance of both verbal and nonverbal communication in human groups. While recording the language of participants, the observer should also attend to nonverbal forms of communication. For example, in educational settings nonverbal communication would include how students get the attention of or otherwise approach instructors, such as waving their hands in the air. In group settings a great deal of fidgeting and moving about may reveal things about attention and involvement. How participants dress, express affection, and sit together or apart are examples of nonverbal cues about social norms and patterns.

Again, the wilderness program provides informative examples. Hugging emerged as a nonverbal way of providing support at times of emotional distress or celebration, for example, a way to recognize when someone had overcome some particularly difficult challenge, like making it up across a ledge along a cliff face. But subgroups differed in amount of and comfort with hugging, and different field conferences manifested different amounts of hugging. When the group felt disparate, separated, with people on their own "trips," isolated from each other, little hugging occurred either in pairs or around the group campfire. When the depth of connection was deeper, shoulder-to-shoulder contact around the campfire was common and group singing was more likely. Over time, it became possible to read the tenor of the group by observing the amount and nature of physical contact participants were having with each other—and participants in groups with a lot of hugging and connectedness reported noticeably greater personal change.

In evaluating an international development project, I observed that the three host country nationals ("locals") had developed a subtle set of hand signals and gestures that the American staff never noticed. In meetings, the host country nationals regularly communicated with each other and operated as a team using these nonverbal signals. Later, having gained their confidence, I asked the local staff members about the gestures. They told me that the Americans had insisted that each person participate as an individual on an equal footing in staff meetings and, to support an atmosphere of openness, the Americans asked them not to use their own language during staff meetings. But the locals wanted to operate as a unit to counter the power of the Americans, so they developed subtle gestures to communicate with each other since they were denied use of their own language.

Parameswaran (2001) has described how she relied on reading nonverbal cues to tell how potential interviewees reacted to her subject matter, the study of young middle-class women in India who read Western romance novels. She had to depend on reading body language to pick up hostility, disapproval, support, or openness because the verbal formalities of some interactions offered fewer cues than nonverbal reactions. Among the young women, giggles, winks, animated interactions, lowered eyes, and direct gaze became cues about how the fieldwork was progressing.

A caution is in order here. Nonverbal behaviors are easily misinterpreted, especially cross-culturally. Therefore, whenever possible and appropriate, having observed what appear to be significant nonverbal behaviors, some effort should be made to follow up with those involved to find out directly from them what the nonverbal behaviors really meant. I confirmed with other participants in the wilderness program the importance of hugging as a mechanism that they themselves used to sense the tenor of the group.

Unobtrusive Observations

Being observed can make people self-conscious and generate anxiety, especially when the observations are part of an evaluation. Regardless of how sensitively observations are made, the possibility always exists that people will behave differently under conditions where an observation or evaluation is taking place than they would if the observer were not present.

> Even when well-intentioned and cooperative, the research subject's knowledge that he is participating in a scholarly search may confound the investigator's data. . . . It is important to note early that the awareness of testing need not, by itself, contaminate responses. It is a question of probabilities, but the probability

> of bias is high in any study in which a respondent is aware of his subject status. (Webb et al. 1966:13)

Concern about reactions to being observed has led some social scientists to recommend covert observations as discussed earlier in this chapter. An alternative strategy involves searching for opportunities to collect "unobtrusive measures" (Webb et al. 1966). Unobtrusive measures are those made without the knowledge of the people being observed and without affecting what is observed.

Robert L. Wolf and Barbara L. Tymitz (1978) included unobtrusive measures in their naturalistic inquiry evaluation of the National Museum of Natural History at the Smithsonian Institution. They looked for "wear spots" as indicators of use of particular exhibit areas. They decided that worn rugs would indicate the popularity of particular areas in the museum. The creative evaluator can learn a number of things about a program by looking for physical clues. Dusty equipment or files may indicate things that are not used. Areas that are used a great deal by children in a school will look different—that is, more worn—than areas that are little used.

In a week-long staff training program for 300 people, I asked the kitchen to systematically record how much coffee was consumed in the morning, afternoon, and evening each day. Those sessions that I judged to be particularly boring had a correspondingly higher level of coffee consumption. Active and involving sessions showed less coffee consumption, regardless of time of day. (Participants could get up and get coffee whenever they wanted.)

In the wilderness program, the thickness of notebooks called "learning logs" became an unobtrusive indicator of how engaged participants were in self-reflective journaling. All participants were provided with learning logs at the beginning of the first field conference and were encouraged to use them for private reflections and journaling. These three-ring binders contained almost no paper when first given to participants. Participants brought the learning logs back each time they returned to the wilderness. (The program involved four different trips over the course of a year.) The extent to which paper had been added to the notebooks was one indicator of the extent to which the logs were being used.

The personnel of the National Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management have a kind of unobtrusive measure they use in "evaluating" the wilderness habits of groups that go through an area such as the San Juan River in Utah. The canyons along the San Juan River are a very fragile environment. The regulations for use of that land are essentially "take only photographs, leave only footprints." This means that all garbage, including human waste and feces, are to be carried out. It takes several days to go down the river. By observing the amount and types of garbage groups carry out, one can learn a great deal about the wilderness habits of various groups and their compliance with river regulations.

The creative observer, aware of the variety of things to be learned from studying physical and social settings, will look for opportunities to incorporate unobtrusive measures into fieldwork, thereby manifesting a "sympathy toward multi-method inquiry, triangulation, playfulness in data collection, outcroppings as measures, and alternatives to self report" (Webb and Weick 1983:210).

A particularly powerful example of unobtrusive fieldwork is Laura Palmer's (1988) study of letters and remembrances left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., a work she called *Shrapnel in the Heart*. For the unobtrusive part of her fieldwork, Palmer sampled items left at the memorial, all of which are saved and warehoused by the U.S. government. She categorized and analyzed types of items and the content of messages. In some cases, because of identifying information contained in letters or included with objects (photographs, baby shoes, artwork), she was able, through intensive investigative work, to locate the people who left the materials and interview them. Their stories, the intrusive part of her study, combined with vivid descriptions of the objects that led her to them, offer dramatic and powerful insights into the effects of the Vietnam War on the lives of survivors. In one sense, her analysis of letters, journals, photos, and messages can be thought of as a nontraditional and creative form of document analysis, another important fieldwork strategy.

Documents

Records, documents, artifacts, and archives—what has traditionally been called "material culture" in anthropology—constitute a particularly rich source of information about many organizations and programs. Thus, archival strategies and techniques constitute part of the repertoire of field research and evaluation (Hill 1993). In contemporary society, all kinds of entities leave a trail of paper and artifacts, a kind of spoor that can be mined as part of fieldwork. Families keep photographs, children's schoolwork, letters, old Bibles with detailed genealogies, bronzed baby shoes, and other sentimental objects that can inform and enrich family case studies. People who commit suicide leave behind suicide notes that can reveal patterns of despair in a society (Wilkinson 1999). Gangs and others inscribe public places with graffiti. Organizations of all kinds produce mountains of records, both public and private. Indeed, an oft-intriguing form of analysis involves comparing official statements found in public documents (brochures, board minutes, annual reports) with private memos and what the evaluation observer actually hears or sees occurring the program. Client files are another rich source of case data to supplement field observations and interviews. For example, Vesneski and Kemp (2000) coded and analyzed intake sheets and copies of family plans produced during more than 100 "family conferences" involving the extended families of abused or neglected children in child welfare decision making in the state of Washington.

At the very beginning of an evaluation or organizational fieldwork, access to potentially important documents and records should be negotiated. The ideal situation would include access to all routine records on clients, all correspondence from and to program staff, financial and budget records, organizational rules, regulations, memoranda, charts, and any other official or unofficial documents generated by or for the program. These kinds of documents provide the evaluator with information about many things that cannot be observed. They may reveal things that have taken place before the evaluation began. They may include private interchanges to which the evaluator would not otherwise be privy. They can reveal goals or decisions that might be otherwise unknown to the evaluator.

In evaluating the mission fulfillment of a major philanthropic foundation, I examined 10 years of annual reports. Each report was professionally designed, elegantly printed, and widely disseminated—and each report stated a slightly different mission for the foundation. It turned out that the president of the foundation wrote an annual introduction and simply stated the mission from memory. The publication designer routinely lifted this "mission statement" from the president's letter and highlighted it in bold font at the beginning of the report, often on the cover page. From year to year the focus changed until, over the course of 10 years, the stated mission had changed dramatically without official board action, approval, or even awareness. Further investigation through years of board minutes revealed that, in fact, the board had never adopted a mission statement at all, a matter of considerable surprise to all involved.

As this example shows, documents prove valuable not only because of what can be learned directly from them but also as stimulus for paths of inquiry that can be pursued only through direct observation and interviewing. As with all information to which an evaluator has access during observations, the confidentiality of program records, particularly client records, must be respected. The extent to which actual references to and quotations from program records and documents are included in a final report depends on whether the documents are considered part of the public record and therefore able to be publicized without breach of confidentiality. In some cases, with permission and proper safeguards to protect confidentiality, some information from private documents can be quoted directly and cited.

Program records can provide a behind-the-scenes look at program processes and how they came into being. In the wilderness program evaluation, program staff made their files available to me. I discovered a great deal of information not available to other program participants: letters detailing both conceptual and financial debates between the technical staff (who led the wilderness trips) and the project directors (who had responsibility for the overall management of the program). Without knowledge of those arguments it would have been impossible to fully understand the nature of the interactions between field staff and executive staff in the project. Disagreements about program finances constituted but one arena of communication difficulties during the program, including time in the wilderness. Interviews with those involved revealed quite different perceptions of the nature of the conflicts, their intensity, and their potential for resolution. While participants became aware of some arguments among staff, for the most part they were unaware of the origins of those conflicts and the extent to which program implementation was hampered by them.

My review of files also revealed the enormous complexity of the logistics for the wilderness education program. Participants (college deans, program directors, administrators) were picked up at the airport in vans and driven to the wilderness location where the field conference would take place. Participants were supplied with all the gear necessary for surviving in the wilderness. Prior to each field trip, staff had many telephone and written exchanges with individual participants about particular needs and fears. Letters from participants, especially those new to the wilderness, showed how little they understood about what they were getting into. One seasoned administrator and hard-core smoker inquired, with reference to the first 10-day hike in the heart of the Gila wilderness, "Will there be a place to buy cigarettes along the way?" Talk about being clueless! But by the end of the year of field trips, he had given up smoking. His letter of inquiry alerted me to the importance of this pre-post observation.

Without having looked over this correspondence, I would have missed the extent to which preparation for the one-week experiences in the wilderness consumed the time and energy of program staff. The intensity of work involved before the field conferences helped explain the behavior of staff once the field trips got under way. So much had gone into the preparations, virtually none of which was appreciated by or known to program participants, that program staff would sometimes experience a psychological letdown effect and have difficulty energizing themselves for the actual wilderness experience.

Learning to use, study, and understand documents and files is part of the repertoire of skills needed for qualitative inquiry. For an extended discussion of the interpretation of documents and material culture, see Hodder (2000).

Observing What Does Not Happen

The preceding sections have described the things one can observe in a setting or program. Observing activities, interactions, what people say, what they do, and the nature of the physical setting is important in a comprehensive approach to fieldwork. But what about observing what does *not* happen?

The potential absurdity of speculating about what does not occur is illustrated by a Sufi story. During a plague of locusts, the wise-fool Mulla Nasrudin, always looking on the bright side, went from village to village encouraging people by observing how fortunate they were that elephants had no wings. "You people don't realize how lucky you are. Imagine what life would be like with elephants flying overhead. These locusts are nothing."

To observe that elephants have no wings is indeed data. Moreover, elephants have no fins, claws, feathers, or branches. Clearly, once one ventures into the area of observing what does not happen, there are a near-infinite number of things one could point out. The "absence of occurrence" list could become huge. It is therefore with some caution that I include among the tasks of the observer that of noting what does not occur.

If social science theory, program goals, implementation designs, and/or proposals suggest that certain things ought to happen or are expected to happen, then it is appropriate for the observer or evaluator to note that those things did not happen. If a community where water is scarce shows no evidence of conflict over water rights, an anthropologist could be expected to report and explain this absence of community conflict. If a school program is supposed to, according to its funding mandate and goals, provide children with opportunities to explore the community and no such explorations occur, it is altogether appropriate for the evaluator to note said implementation failure. If the evaluator reported only what occurred, a question might be left in the mind of the reader about whether the other activities had occurred but had simply not been observed. Likewise, if a criminal justice program is supposed to provide one-to-one counseling to juveniles and no such counseling takes place, it is entirely appropriate for the evaluator to note the absence of counseling.

In observing early childhood programs, the absence of children's art on the walls in one center stood out. Indeed, the absence of any colorful posters or art of any kind stood out because all other centers' walls were covered with colorful displays. When I pointed this out, embarrassed staff members explained that they had set in motion a planning process for decorating the walls that had become bogged down and they had just neglected to get back to the issue because, they realized, they got gotten used to the way things were.

Thus, it can be appropriate to note that something did not occur when the observer's basic knowledge of and experience with the phenomenon suggests that the ab-