

## Learning Through Observation

Soc 357  
Summer 2006

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### A Basic Distinction

- **Structured Observation:** observation guided by clear rules about who you will observe (your sample) and what you will observe about them
- **Unstructured Observation:** observation that does not use systematic control techniques
  - a.k.a. ethnography, participant-observation, field research

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### What is Field Research?

- Observation of naturally occurring events
- Goal is to build scientific theory, ie. To generate hypotheses
- AKA “participant observation” and “ethnography”

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## Roots in American Sociology

- The Chicago School, 1920s-1930s
- Areas of study: ethnic groups and other small communities, deviance & powerlessness, occupations & professions, ordinary life

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## When is it useful?

- Obtaining insider's view of events
- Maintaining complexity of actions, events
- Studying relationship between person and setting – different units of analysis
- Projects where other research methods are precluded by money, ethics, other methodological problems
- When there is little known about the phenomenon

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## Steps

- Choosing a site
- Sampling
- Access & Self-Presentation
- Recording Observations
- Analyzing Data

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## Choosing a site

- Lofland & Lofland: "Start where you are" – depends on where you are
  - E.g. Adler & Adler, "Wheeling and Dealing"

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## Sampling

- Non-random selection of people & events
- Goal: Maximizing variation/differences
- Multiple cases, more recently
- Use **theoretical sampling**: identify analytical categories you think will have important distinctions & sample based on those
- Use **snowball sampling**: gather informants based on recommendation of others

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## Example: Eliasoph, Avoiding Politics

- Wanted to know why people don't talk about politics i.e. Investigating a cultural phenomenon
- Chose to study five groups: two volunteer groups, one social club, two community activist groups
- Theoretical sampling: setting might make a difference to talk
- Finding: similar discourse across all groups, that avoided making "publicly spirited claims" in public places

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## Getting Access & Self-Presentation

- Formal organizations often have **gatekeepers**
- Reliance on key **informants**
- Researcher has to decide what role s/he will play  
Participant → Participant-Observer → Observer
- Goal: Preserve natural order of group
- Covert research?
  - Eg. Tearoom Trade

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## Recording Observations

- Primarily **unstructured observation**
- Use **field jottings** to record incidents
- Write up **field notes** at the end of each day
- Focus on concrete behavioral details; don't analyze
- Keep analysis, feelings, impressions in a separate set of notes
- Verifiability?

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## Analyzing Data

- Coding for themes: highlighting bits of text, assigning meaning
- Developing ideas
- Drawing and verifying conclusions
- Use **triangulation**: multiple sources, including respondent review

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## Two ways to approach theorizing

- **Grounded Theory** (Glaser & Strauss, 1967): theory that emerges from observations, not theory that is derived a priori
  - aka: **Inductive reasoning**
- **Extended Case Method** (Manchester School of social anthropology, 1950s-1970s; Burawoy, 1998): start with a theory, find a case that helps you test & modify your theory
  - **Quasi-deductive** reasoning

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## Examples of Theorizing

- Creating system for classifying behaviors, phenomena
  - E.g. Humphreys, Tearoom Trade
- Looking at particular instance(s) of more general phenomena
  - E.g. Browne, The Used Car Game
- Understanding processes
  - E.g. Adlers, Shifts and Oscillations in Deviant Careers

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## Strengths of Field Research

- Maintains complexity of social phenomena
- Helps to develop hypotheses that can be tested systematically
- Helps us understand connections between variables
- Some argue it's more ethical to take into account meaning of phenomena from subject's point of view

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## Limits of Field Research

- Inefficient method of collecting data
- Can't describe distribution of phenomena in a population
- Limited generalizability
- Can't "test" hypotheses without reference to other cases
- Merton's critique: Making evidence fit your theory, rather than other way around

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## Debates – Validity of observations

- "On Stage" Effects
  - Deception, becoming an insider, extended observation, cross-checking/ "Triangulation"
- Persistent Changes
  - Blind measurement, Warm-up period, Protocols for interaction
- Researcher Bias
  - Reflexivity, comparing observations, operationalizing variables
- Incomplete Observations
  - Insider informants, multiple observers, third-party observers

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## Debates - Ethics

- Ethics
  - Of covert research
  - Of using people to further career goals
    - Adler & Adler: Reciprocity is essential

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## Debates – Taking on the Worldview of Others?

- Dorothy Smith, **Standpoint Theory**: Goal should be to elaborate the standpoint of the people we study
- Pierre Bourdieu & others: researchers' concerns aren't the same as those of the people we study

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## Debates – Is This Really Science?

- Recall characteristics of Science:
  - Developing testable hypotheses
  - Based on observation and verification
- Theories are meaningless if we don't understand motivation for behavior
- This can be done rigorously, findings are valid

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## Analyzing Qualitative Research

- Adler & Adler as exemplar
  - Looking at **process** and **variations within that process**
  - Theoretical rationale: "insights into the problems involved in leaving deviance"
  - How do they use evidence to support their descriptions?

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## Evaluating Adler & Adler

- Sampling – theoretically meaningful?
- Getting access & roles played?
- What problems did they encounter?
- Recording observations & Data analysis – was it systematic?
- Theorizing: was it post-hoc?
- Which findings are most trustworthy? Why?
- Which findings are least trustworthy? Why?

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## Examples of Observation Projects

- “Priming at the Pub”
- Ice cream cone eating
- Purchases (timing, different kinds)
- Analysis of TV commercials
- Analysis of advertising, photographs

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## Homework for Thursday

- Read Observation Assignment Instructions
- Brainstorm what kind of project you would like to do
  - Public observation/behavior
  - Print/TV study
  - Gender, race, age and Some other more complex variable

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