

Ethnographic (Observational) Research, Interviews, and Surveys

By Dana Lynn Driscoll, Ph.D. Student, Purdue University, Dr. Paul V. Anderson, Miami U., Ohio

Ethics of Research: The following are some ethical considerations you need to consider. Some types of research may require additional considerations depending on your field of inquiry.

- No harm to subjects (physical and/or emotional)
- No taking advantage of “convenience” populations (i.e. students, children, prisoners, at-risk groups)
- Objectivity vs. subjectivity of research (individual biases, presenting observations vs. opinions, etc)
- Individual subjects should be anonymous-> no identifying data if possible
- Research involving human subjects requires participant consent (and sometimes Institutional Review Board approval)

Types of Ethnographic Participation: Level of participation is one of the first considerations in doing ethnographic research! Make your choice wisely.

- “Fly on the Wall” – Full observer, no direct interaction with participants.
- Limited Participant – Some interaction with participants, such as interviews or conversation, but observation is still a key method.
- Full participant – A full participant takes part in all activities and becomes “part” of the culture.

*****How will your participation style affect your ethnographic study?**

- Can a researcher change an event by taking part in it?

Data Collection: When you collect your data, you want to maximize your time spent observing and eliminate any biases you may have while observing.

- Write observations in double-entry notebook to separate observation from opinion (see worksheet on double-entry notebook below)
- Recording vs. note taking
 - What can a recording capture?
 - How will recording change the event being recorded?
- Collect of “artifacts” from the group.
- What are the “norms” of the group?
- Who are the “deviants” of the group? Sometimes you can learn as much from the “outsiders” as you can from those in the “in-crowd.”

Data Analysis: Data analysis is where you will collect your observations and artifacts, make generalizations, and write up your results!

- **Organize data into similar groups**
 - Language/communicative practices (slang, in-group words, ways of writing, ways of “doing” literacy)
 - Behaviors and norms (what is typical behavior?)
 - Artifacts – what do they tell you about the group?
 - Description of group members/personalities
 - Description of physical/virtual spaces in which the group resides
 - Description of activities the group participates in.

- **Decide what is important to highlight/discuss**
 - Be sure to give an overview of the group before going into the specifics.
 - What is interesting to you?

What will shed new light on the group in question?

Double Entry Notebook Assignment

A simple method ethnographers use to record observations is called the double-entry notebook. The notebook helps an observer separate **facts** she or he is observing from **interpretations** of those facts.

Here is the format:

<i>Raw Data/ What I saw</i>	<i>What I thought / Interpretation</i>
Here you record what you actually see happening. This should be purely what you actually see happening, not what you think about it. Record direct quotes, behaviors, actions, and other observations.	Here you record everything else—why you think what you observe is happening, your thoughts about it, the connections you make between what is happening and what isn't, etc.

Below is an example from an actual student ethnographer's journal. These notes were taken by a student who was observing a dorm for students with disabilities. Most of the students she observed had been wheelchair bound most of their lives.

<i>Raw Data/ What I saw</i>	<i>What I thought / Interpretation</i>
White marker board reading "Be back soon, emergency at home" in a childlike scrawl.	This really affected me. I know that this had to have been written by a student at least my own age—but the writing appeared so child-like. It just showed me something, that this world created for them isn't perfect, and that they have just as many, if not more problems than "normal" people do.
Homework is done with the assistance of a hired assistant who scribes as the students speak. Essay assignments take additional time because of the tedious process.	It seems like such more WORK to have to be one of these students! Not only do they have the challenge of writing itself, but they have an additional step of having someone else have to take notes, type their papers, and more. Even simple tasks we take for granted as students are difficult for these individuals.
Jason has a horn on his chair he blows quite loudly. He doesn't use the bell in his room for the nurse, instead calls her by the horn.	I think he wants to be free of the bell, to call the nurse in his own individualistic way.

Four Principles of Good Interviewing By Anne Beaufort

Open-ended questions

(no quick, easy answer)

Questions that get people telling stories to make a point.

Ask them to give you a "for instance..."

Follow-up questions...

(listen to what they say and follow-up with more good questions)

Easy to hard

(start with easy questions, work up to sensitive questions)

Conducting a Survey By Dr. Paul V. Anderson

Please note that in order to use a survey in your research for your problem-solution project, you must survey at least 25 people. In addition, you must follow the guidelines Anderson outlines below.

The following is adapted from *Technical Communication: A Reader-Centered Approach*, 5th ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2003.

The following suggestions will help you create an effective questionnaire that provides useful information and elicits the cooperation of the people you ask to fill it out.

- **Mix closed and open questions.** *Closed questions* allow only a limited number of possible responses. They provide answers that are easy to tabulate. *Open questions* allow the respondent freedom in devising the answer. They provide respondents an opportunity to react to your subject matter in their own terms... You may want to follow each of your closed questions with an open one that simply asks respondents to comment. A good way to conclude a survey is to invite additional comments.
- **Ask reliable questions.** A *reliable* question is one that every respondent will understand and interpret in the same way. For instance, if Roger asked, "Do you like high-quality pastries?" different readers might interpret the term "high-quality" in different ways. Roger might instead ask how much the respondents would be willing to pay for pastries or what kinds of snacks they like to eat with their coffee.
- **Ask valid questions.** A *valid* question is one that produces the information you are seeking. For example, to determine how much business the doughnut shop might attract, Roger could ask either of these two questions:

Invalid	How much do you like doughnuts?
Valid	How many times a month would you visit a doughnut shop located within three blocks of campus?

The first question is invalid because the facts that students like doughnuts does not necessarily mean that they would patronize a doughnut shop. The second question is valid because it can help Roger estimate how many customers the shop would have.

Use the sample survey below to help you design your own.

	Closed Questions
Forced Choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respondents must select one of two choices (yes/no, either/or). <p><i>Example: Would you buy doughnuts at a shop near campus? Y / N</i></p>
Multiple Choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respondents select from several predefined alternatives. <p><i>Example: How many times a month would you visit the shop?</i></p> <p><i>___ 1 to 2 ___ 3 to 4 ___ 5 or more</i></p>
Ranking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respondents indicate an order of preference. <p><i>Example: Please rank the following types of doughnuts, using a 1 for your favorite, and so on.</i></p>
Rating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respondents pick a number on a scale. <p><i>Example: Please circle the number on the following scale that best describes the importance of the following features of a doughnut shop:</i></p> <p><i>Music: Unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 Important</i></p>
	Open Questions
Fill in the Blank	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respondents complete a statement. <p><i>Example: When deciding where to eat a late-night snack, I usually base my choice on _____.</i></p>
Essay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respondents can frame responses in any way they choose. <p><i>Example: Please suggest ways we could make a doughnut shop that would be appealing to you.</i></p>

- Avoid biased questions. Don't phrase your questions in ways that seem to guide your respondents to give a particular response.

Biased Wouldn't it be good to have a coffee shop near campus?

Unbiased How much would you like to have a coffee shop near campus?

- Place your most interesting questions first. Save questions about the respondent's age or similar characteristics until the end.
- Limit the number of questions. If your questionnaire is lengthy, people may not complete it. Decide what you really need to know and ask only about that.
- Test your questionnaire. Even small changes in wording may have a substantial effect on the way people respond. Questions that seem perfectly clear to you may appear puzzling to others. Before completing your survey, try out your questions with a few people from your target group.