



# Observations

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Qualitative researchers often need observations of people, their actions and settings, but apart from that general direction it is hard to pinpoint a superior kind of observational data. What to observe, and how, depends on the project. In this chapter I will try to show how the preferable kind of observations is a highly varied category. Then I will argue that there are still particular and quite fundamental qualities to strive for, even though every project is distinctive in its character. But first, let me start with the general aims of observations, the theoretical assumptions of the approach and its historical background.

## COLLECTING DATA BY OBSERVATIONS

What social scientists typically aim for when making observations is to gather data on groups and people in their everyday lives. An observer often participates in daily routines

of a setting and produces written accounts of ongoing interactions.

The observer usually tries to develop relations with the people in the setting and get as close as possible to their activities and experiences. Physical and social proximity is essential (Emerson et al., 1995, pp. 1–2). An opposite approach is ‘arm chair research’, where the researcher stays in the office and relies on second-hand reports. To collect observational data is to generate first-hand reports: to see, hear, feel and ‘be there’ personally. Drawing on field presence the researcher writes field notes that capture slices of social practice.

Erving Goffman (2001, p. 154) emphasizes the personal and corporal character of observations. You get data, he argues, ‘by subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals’. The aim is to get into and sustain relations to others as they respond to ‘what life does to them’. It is not just a matter of listening and writing down what people

say, it is a matter of 'tuning up' your body in relation to the setting, and being able to note also 'minor grunts and groans', subtle gestures and bodily responses (Goffman, 2001, pp. 154–5). The observer is not acting like an interviewer or a listener but as a witness.

Now it might sound like observations are purely inductive but that is a simplification. Observers do underline the importance of being open to anything, writing inclusive field notes, not imposing exogenous meanings, and so on (Goffman, 2001; Emerson et al., 1995), but the general advice is not to pretend to be blank or unprejudiced. The advice is that it is possible and recommendable to learn from a field. Observers are convinced that there are things 'out there' that we do not know despite all the books and articles we have read. There are interactions and processes, performances and routines, riddles and ambiguities that we cannot figure out at the desk.

This does not suggest pure induction (see Kennedy and Thornberg, Chapter 4, this volume) but, rather, empirical research that communicates with theory and previous research. In the seminal work *Street Corner Society*, William Foote Whyte (1943/1993, p. 287) talks about 'to take the theory out in the field', that is to animate theory and challenge it with observations. To get this process going, the researcher's subject is put to use. So when a fieldworker interacts with those studied (thereby also having some impact on them) it should not be seen as 'contaminating' the data. The fieldworker needs to get sensitive to how she is seen and treated by field members, and to use this information as a clue to understanding what is going on (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 3).

To enter the worlds of other people, to encounter their activities and concerns first hand and close up – that is the fieldworker's 'first commitment' (Emerson, 2001, p. 1; see Bengry, Chapter 7, this volume). On top of that, one continually has to grapple with a range of issues that never will be completely settled – for instance the tension between being involved and being detached, and

between attending to the field and attending to how one constructs and represents one's observations of the field (Atkinson, 2001; Emerson, 2001, pp. 22–4).

In any case, 'being there' and witnessing are the foundation. It can be traced back to an ethnographic turn in anthropology in the beginning of the twentieth century (Emerson, 2001, p. 5, also see Buscatto, Chapter 21, this volume). A fieldworker in anthropology was at that point increasingly being seen not as an 'inquirer', relying on interviews and questionnaires, but as an observer. Anthropologists had started to get uneasy with established theories about others' cultures across the world and wanted to obtain more original and accurate data, and they had started to distrust missionaries and other untrained fieldworkers. Longer stays in the field, distance to colonial interpreters and direct contact with field members became the method, as in Bronislaw Malinowski's somewhat idealized approach (Emerson, 2001, pp. 6–8).

This kind of observation was then imported into sociology during the first decade of the twentieth century. It came to flourish in the Chicago school and its ambitions to propel students out into various social worlds within a sprawling metropolis (Emerson, 2001, p. 10). Field research could very well include documents, statistics and interviews but first-hand observations came to be distinguishing, for instance in Nels Anderson's *The Hobo* (1923/1961) and Paul G. Cressey's *The Taxi Dance Hall* (1932). William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943) turned into the 'substantive exemplar' (Emerson, 2001, p. 13), a model for generations of observers. Whyte argued that staying in 'Cornerville' – the Italian slum he was investigating – and describing people's activities in detail was the only way to gain knowledge of local life.

Also Erving Goffman's *Asylums* (1961/1990) remains a strong example. By spending a year in the company of patients at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, DC, Goffman managed to collect observational data on the social situation of inmates in what he identified as 'total

institutions'. He specified the moral career of the inmates, the institution's privilege system and mortifying powers, and the inmates' adjustments and manipulations. Not only the formal features of an institution could be observed but also the informal ones, the 'underlife' (Goffman, 1961/1990, p. 176). *Asylums* could hardly have been written if Goffman had not been present in the 'daily round of petty contingencies' to which institutional members are subject (Goffman, 1961/1990, p. x). His everyday observations played a crucial role.

Social scientists have employed observations to analyze countless things. Crimes and social problems, subcultures and organizations, elites and social movements, youth and the elderly, family life and childhood, professionals and businessmen, face-to-face behavior and Internet variants – observations can be used all over the place. There are no limits other than the practicalities of getting access and the ethics of not exposing people's identities or threatening their integrity. No fieldworker should force a study upon people, and nowadays hidden observations are more or less deemed unethical. Normally, researchers ask for consent. An observation study in disguise needs very good reasons to be done, even though a completely transparent account of any study can be hard to present to field members (for a more comprehensive ethical discussion, see Buscatto, Chapter 21, this volume).

Still we may ask ourselves: observing what? I will now dive into a more contemporary project to illustrate how a particular style of doing observations can be developed. It is not intended as The Example but as one example. From this we may outline some principles of how to think about observations more concretely, especially as a beginner.

## IT DEPENDS ON THE PROJECT

Let's say a researcher is involved in a project on power and the elderly (see Stephens et al., Chapter 40, this volume), more precisely:

residents' influence at nursing homes (Harnett, 2010). Now any observation on people, actions and settings at nursing homes will not do. The researcher might very well find it intriguing to do crossword puzzles together with residents, and listen to their winding life stories over family photos, but that will most likely not generate any direct picture of the residents' influence.

Similarly, time spent among staff members, listening to their storytelling about weekends, vacations and family life, for instance, would not necessarily advance the project. The researcher will have to 'zoom in' on interactions between residents and staff in which power somehow stands out as crucial. She will probably find it especially rewarding to zoom in on particular interactions in which residents try to do things that staff members find improper, irritating or different: asking for an extra shower, demanding another blouse instead of the one staff members offer, requesting more time outdoors, and so on.

In such interactions, the issue of power in nursing homes will most likely become reportable in a much clearer sense than in other interactions (Harnett, 2010, pp. 295–99). As Emerson and his colleagues recommend: select a site in which the pursued phenomenon is 'particularly salient', and where its various issues 'concern the members' (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 134).

Such was the case for Tove Harnett (2010). She had worked part-time as a nursing aide for seven years and knew very well the strongly routinized regime that seldom facilitated residents' influence; however, she had not tried to write it up ethnographically. Still, doing crossword puzzles and looking at photo albums of family members also came to be rewarding. As a former caregiver, Harnett (2010, p. 294) wanted to balance her role at the nursing home at issue by spending time with residents in non-caregiving situations. Harnett tried to immerse herself in the setting, as ethnographers recommend (Emerson et al., 1995), but from the start, she was more familiar with the staff members'

situation than that of the residents, and therefore had to work to get closer to the latter to limit one-sided participation (Harnett, 2010, p. 294). To spend time with residents could teach the researcher something on their practicalities and tempo, their viewpoints and backgrounds, their concerns.

What would have happened if the researcher had skipped the crosswords and family photos, and went directly to observing staff–resident interactions when residents articulated requests? How would another researcher have done without the years-long experience of working as a nursing aide? The only thing we know for sure is that each project is special in its composition of (a) researcher, (b) setting and (c) observed phenomena, and that each project, therefore, needs careful consideration before even tentatively defining what kind of observations one should strive for. Such considerations are probably best accomplished in tight relation to the setting at issue, and as an ongoing process rather than a prefabricated scheme.

Harnett felt a bit closer to staff than to residents as she entered the nursing home and started to interact with its members. If somebody would have said to her then, ‘Keep away from the crosswords and go directly for residents’ requests’, as an observational recommendation, the study might have been much more insensitive to precisely those requests. If, on the contrary, the ethnographer allows herself to feel the need to get closer to residents’ ‘non-caregiving situations’ that may equip her with a sort of observational sensitivity toward the fact that (1) residents typically find themselves in situations that are constituted far from the formal logic of running a nursing home as a whole, and that (2) ‘caregiving situations’ may be given a considerably broader definition than staff members typically grant.

Getting help fetching a pen for one’s crossword, or reaching a photo album at the top of a shelf – if ‘care’ is defined from the standpoint of a given resident’s everyday habits, it might stretch far beyond routinized bed-and-body caregiving work (Gubrium, 1975/1997, p. 124).

‘Immersion’, as Emerson et al. (1995, p. 2) write, ‘gives the fieldworker access to the fluidity of others’ lives and enhances his sensitivity’.

Ideal observational data, then, is hard to define. It depends on the researcher’s interest and previous experiences, on his or her ‘gaze’ or theoretical perspective, on how the project unfolds in terms of relations, emotions and networks. A fieldworker is a person whose biography not only precedes the project and therefore forms it, but also gets actualized and developed in and through it. So to, beforehand, recommend precisely ‘what to look for’ is not possible. It is a matter of local negotiations with – and theoretical constructions of – the field.

Even if we just say ‘try to get close to the phenomenon’, ‘zoom in on what the project is about’, we may find ourselves asking, ‘Well, what are the limits of this phenomenon, really?’, and ‘Given what I now see and hear, shouldn’t I modify my project, or change it radically?’ No matter how neat a project proposal looks on paper, a fieldworker may still stand in a given setting and strongly sense the need for adjustments.

### ... BUT THERE ARE STILL RECOGNIZED QUALITIES TO AIM FOR

By now I hope it is clear that I argue that any advice about observations must be contextually and reflexively situated (also see Buscatto, Chapter 21, this volume). For readers of method books, this comes as no surprise. Consider these excerpts from acknowledged authors:

The ethnographer cannot take in everything; rather, he will, in conjunction with those in the setting, develop certain perspectives by engaging in some activities and relationships rather than others. Moreover, it will often be the case that relationships with those under study follow political fault lines in the setting, exposing the ethnographer selectively to varying priorities and points of view. As a result, the task for the ethnographer is not to determine ‘the truth’ but to reveal the multiple truths apparent in others’ lives. (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 3)

[...] we cannot include every detail and every scrap of knowledge. Not only are time and space at a premium in the production of any written account, so too is the reader's attention. Descriptions and exemplifications that are too dense, too detailed or too protracted will not normally lead to a usable text. [...] the ethnographer needs to construct accounts through partial, selective reporting. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983/2007, p. 198)

Such formulations underline how impossible it is to 'just observe'. What I would like to stress, though, is that there are still some quite uncontroversial qualities to aim for, more or less regardless of field relations, personal or theoretical biases and academic expectations. Three of them can be called (1) details, (2) sequences and (3) atmosphere. This is my argument: If the observer attends to some reasonable amount of specific and fine facets of what people do and say (details), and if the observer captures how things are accomplished in strings or chains of actions or practices (sequences), then he or she will most likely generate interesting material to draw on. The observer will also be helped if he or she finds a way to articulate what others experience wordlessly (atmosphere): the mood, the 'air' or tone of a social environment. If, on the other hand, the observer does *not* take these qualities into account at all, there might be difficulties in conducting analyses with the observational data as a base.

I will now try to exemplify these qualities and illustrate how they are embedded into established ethnographic traditions. I am certainly not arguing that these qualities would be the only ones to strive for. Rather, my aim is to review them in order to continue to, as Emerson and his colleagues write, 'demystify' ethnographic practices (Emerson et al., 1995, p. xii).

## Details

There is a recurrent ideal of specification in qualitative observations, that one must not stay at general levels, not go into abstract or

normative reasoning, and not summarize or jump to conclusions or lose oneself in theoretical models. An observer strives for details.

Looking at two teachers at work, for instance, a trained ethnographer would hardly be pleased with a note saying 'They went into a boring room and started an argument'. In relation to such a note, he or she would probably ask a series of self-reflexive questions to produce details. What, more precisely, made the room appear 'boring'? Did others in the field also act as if they defined it so? What was this 'argument' about? What words and gestures were employed? What happened before and after?

Even if an observer finds a note like this in the notebook at the end of the day, there are probably some remembrances of the episode that could be exposed to fill out details. Jottings are, as Emerson and his colleagues state, later developed into 'full field notes' (Emerson et al., 1995, pp. 48–52). The gaps, the things between the lines, the impressions that we know we have but did not have time or energy to write up – such aspects are highly useful when developing more story-like and scenic notes.

Taken even as jottings, the sentence is far from the mark. 'They went into a boring room and started an argument' could – also in the very situation when the note was written – be substituted with similar short phrases that include more details. For instance: 'walls with cracks, one shouting "Why did you do that?!"' Simply by pinpointing a small amount of detail, fieldworkers find themselves better equipped to elaborate their notes later on, and remembering what captured their attention in the first place.

So the urge for details need not always be an urge for endless descriptions: page after page with seemingly pointless facts. Rather, it is a way to capture and remember social life aided by what 'stood out' for the observer, a way to avoid or at least soften clichés and preconceived ways of seeing things. Anderson writes:



For example, to write down simply that 'the men were shabbily dressed' obscures much detail about specifically how the men dressed, or exactly which details led to the generalization of 'shabbily dressed'. (2005, p. 51)

'Obscures much detail' is the key phrase. A strong ideal would be to, on the contrary, clarify details, illuminate and disclose them. To make observations is to challenge oneself with an urge for details – in the field, at the desk, in one's dialog with data. We should try to 'detail the social and interactional processes that make up people's everyday lives' (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 11). Since such processes often are verbal, people's dialogs turn especially important: 'As far as possible ... speech should be rendered in a manner that approximates to a verbatim report' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983/2007, p. 145).

There is no need for panic. A complete observation is not possible. The trick is not to despise oneself for being unable to capture details all the time, but praise those occasions when at least some details are captured – and train oneself to repeat it. A 'detail' is, in any case, relatively and contextually defined.

In my observations of everyday life at youth care institutions, I have happened to focus on playful interactions, more precisely playfights or fictive violence (Wästerfors, 2016). This could be seen as a detail in itself. Nothing indicates that playfulness or playfights would be constitutive for these settings or dominating in any sense. From the beginning, I found this phenomenon quite peripheral and even unnoticed by many field members, let alone the institutions' outsiders, but gradually I came to look at it as sociologically telling. They exemplified institutional members' – particularly the youths' – striving for re-personalizing themselves within a quite depersonalizing institution. With the help of playfulness, these youths could 'touch' the adults both physically and socially, getting closer to them as persons and experiencing their idiosyncratic responses. Details played a significant role in capturing this phenomenon. This is how I tried to retell one episode in an article (Wästerfors, 2016, pp. 177–8):

After two lessons in technics in a workshop at one institution, a case of playfighting occurred between Ted, a pupil, and Hugo, a teacher, just before we left the workshop for lunch. I was close to not taking notice of it because I had followed Ted and Micke, another pupil, and their schoolwork since early that morning and had the feeling of being 'done', waiting for lunch myself. Ted and Micke had been taught in quite defined steps how to cut and weld metal into 'cats', a cat figure in black metal, with attached head, ears, tail, etc. At the top of the shelves in the workshop, there were series of such cats from previous pupils; they were way too big to bring home after the treatment period. At this point, we have taken off our blue overalls and are waiting for the other ones to finish their work and join us for the outdoor walk to the dining hall. Standing there and waiting, Ted and Hugo exchange some teasing comments and then suddenly Ted aims a kick at Hugo, in a slightly slow and 'open' way (i.e. very noticeable).

*Hugo grabs Ted's leg just when Ted's kick is about to hit its target (Hugo's hip), he gets a grip on this kicking leg and then pushes Ted towards a desk behind him, filled with tools and a vice. Ted resists by grabbing Hugo's shoulder, and they both measure their strengths against each other for a moment, with some moans and 'argh!' It all happens very quickly and produces some noise; Ted is 19 and not a small boy, and Hugo is in his 40s. Then Hugo manages to put Ted on the desk behind him; he almost lifts him up and puts him there. The tools are pressed towards the edges as Ted's body is pushed upon the desk, in a sitting position. (field notes)*

I then start commenting on these notes in the article by adding more observations:

Eventually, Hugo and Ted set themselves free from each other. Hugo stands in front of Ted, who is still sitting on the desk, which one should not do at all, strictly speaking, if following the rules of the institution. They are both a little breathless, with red faces, but not irritated. 'Lucky you!' Hugo says, and Ted replies, 'Or you!' and smiles, both jokingly implying that the other one is the weaker and consequently got off gently. [...] Hugo then checks his trousers and shirt, as if trying to make sure they did not get spoiled somehow.

First, 'I was close to not taking notice...' – the episode as a whole is a detail, a seemingly trivial phenomenon (cf. Silverman, 2007,

p. 16). Brief and passing playfights in institutional settings are far from the official program. So simply by including the episode in my observations, I managed to say something quite unexpected about the field. Nobody else wrote about these things; the episode was not included in any journal or incident report, and the institutional system does not recognize 'play' as relevant.

Second, the notes depicting the episodes are full of details: 'how to cut and weld metal into cats', 'blue overalls', 'a slightly slow and open' kick, a desk 'filled with tools and a vice', the exclamation 'Argh!', and tools being 'pressed towards the edges', for example.

Such details provide the account with data that avoid simplifications. I could have summarized the interaction by saying things like 'they tumble around a while in the workshop', but that would not have helped me to understand how playfights are accomplished, let alone convince readers that I have seen them. Accounts from observations entail a 'persuasive force' (Atkinson, 2001, p. 89) by depicting a scene for those who were not there.

But we may also note an absence of details. 'Some teasing comments', for instance, exchanged by Ted and Hugo at the beginning of the playful episode – what comments? Apparently I did not remember or hear these. 'Some moans' is another escape from details – one may ask what 'moans' I am referring to, and one may even ask what a moan is. One may also ask what it means to 'measure... strength against each other for a moment'. It seems like a clumsy way to summarize a series of body movements that I was not able to distinguish.

So I do not try to show an ideal observation. Another observer would be able to sharpen her senses (and pen) much more, and transform this episode – from interaction in situ to words on paper – in a much cleverer way. Training, style and talent vary. My point is more general: details help. Sensitivity for fine features, words uttered and seemingly pointless objects, creates credibility and rigor for any project. An observer

should especially not hesitate in front of odd things, like big metal cats on a shelf in a workshop. There is a peculiar potential that precisely such things make a scene realistic, not because they are expected in – as in my case here – an institution for youth with criminal experiences, but because they are not expected. All details need not be actively involved in the analysis being crafted out of them. They can just stand there, reminding us about a remarkable world.

I think there is a lot to learn from Sara Danius' (2013) essay on the historical development of the modern novel, *Den blå tvålen*, meaning 'The Blue Soap'. The title is taken from a story by Gustave Flaubert in 1877, in which a bar of blue soap is mentioned as placed on a table. Flaubert only mentions it once and never returns to it. Danius argues that this blue soap represents a novelty in modern literature at the time: to start 'seeing things' in themselves – from an author's gaze – and not necessarily aiming for a particular dramatic significance with all written details. The mundane concreteness that finds its way into modern novels during the nineteenth century and onwards – the vivid descriptions of bodies, faces, objects, conversations, rooms and cities – is accomplished by an abundance of details, and that constitutes a new way of writing.

Danius (2013, p. 19) is not arguing that Flaubert's style 'reproduces' the world (avbildar, in Swedish). Rather, it 'makes it visible' (försynligar). This, too, we recognize from the ethnographic enterprise from the Chicago school and on. We cannot argue that an observer mirrors a reality, but we can argue that he or she actively makes it visible.

Then, coupled with this emerging nineteenth-century literary ambition of seeing things, Danius writes that there was a suspicion that today's ethnographers similarly recognize – a suspicion about what we really gain by all these detailed descriptions. If we can see the world, can we then see through it? I will touch upon this issue again in the conclusion.

## Sequences

Another attractive quality for observers is sequences. To be able to show how phenomena evolve or relate to each other over time is valuable in any project. One particular gesture promotes or provokes another; one actor responds to another; a particular event unfolds step by step. It might take place slowly and subtly or rapidly and dramatically – in any case, a wide range of observable occurrences are possible to portray in terms of ‘first this happened, then that’.

Observers, worried whether they are keeping an eye on sequences or not, can always ask, ‘Then what happened?’ or ‘What happened before?’ Such questions tend to sharpen our senses for gradually accomplished or emerging phenomena.

An eye for sequences helps observers in several ways. First and foremost, a static and reified picture of society is avoided. Attention is given to unfolding or activated contexts. The elderly’s attempts to exert influence in a nursing home and their institutional constraints – to return to Harnett’s (2010) observations – do not take place as a box in an elegant model, or as a dot in a list of policies. Rather, they take place as situated interactions. A concrete elderly resident in a concrete nursing home tries to achieve something by asking, making gestures or obstructing and then a concrete staff member responds. Aspects of the nursing home as such, we may argue, are virtually ‘done’ or reproduced in these kinds of interactions, so that what we ‘see’ is not only one actor responding to another, but also an institutional context brought to life. An example from Harnett’s (2010, pp. 296–7) study:

It is morning and I’m walking with Tina, a staff member, along the corridor. We have just finished helping one resident and left their room when Tina says that we can ‘take’ Nancy, another resident, next. On our way to Nancy’s room, Charlie presses the alarm button in his room. Tina and I go to Charlie’s room, open the door, and are met by the rank smell of urine. Charlie is in bed with soaked sheets. He looks up and asks to get up. ‘Can’t you

stay in bed a bit longer? We’ll come and help you later’, Tina says. ‘Everything is wet’, says Charlie. Tina tells Charlie that he has to stay in bed and that Erica, another staff member, will come and help him later. Tina and I turn around and leave Charlie in his bed as we walk to Nancy, who lives in the room two doors down.

Harnett used these field notes to capture how residents typically needed situationally ‘routine-free’ staff members to be successful in their influence attempts. Since Tina was on her way to ‘take’ Nancy, another resident, she saw herself as sort of locked into an ongoing routine, and attached to the ‘locally taken-for-granted reasons for not complying with residents’ requests’ (Harnett, 2010, p. 296). So Charlie’s request is postponed and passed on to a colleague.

None of these findings could have been observed without attending to sequences. At the heart of the field notes, there is just a short one: Charlie asks to get up and Tina responds. First this happened, then that. These two actions seem quite tightly connected, probably taking place just seconds after another, or less. Then, as a wider but also still quite sequentially organized context, we get information about Tina and the fieldworker’s original mission this morning, Charlie’s alarm, his complaints (‘everything is wet’), Tina’s postponement of help, and so on.

These activities and circumstances are depicted more impressionistically. We do not get exact words for every line or account, and the previously helped resident (before Tina and Harnett entered Charlie’s room) is just mentioned, as is Nancy, the next resident in the row. Still, these things are ordered in the field notes in a way that makes sense for an outsider. We can imagine a situation like this and its chains of events with the help of Harnett’s eye for morning proceedings at a nursing home, and we can understand it.

One of the most insistent advocates for collecting sequences is David Silverman. Inspired by Harvey Sacks, he draws on findings from conversation analysis to make sociologists attend more to the everyday



sequential organization of society. 'Social order', Silverman (2007, p. 48) argues, 'is to be found in even the tiniest activity' (cf. Sacks, 1992, p. 484, formula 'order at all points'). If, for instance, you say "hello" to somebody, or present yourself with your name, you subtly raise anticipations about how others should respond. They tend to be somewhat compelled to say "hello" too, or respond with their names. 'The first turn constitutes a "slot" for the second, and sets up an expectation about what this slot may properly contain' (Silverman, 2007, p. 65).

This, however, does not mean that sequences are mechanical. People may, for instance, respond 'I can't hear you', requesting repetition, and then the original 'slot' or conversational place is sidestepped (Silverman, 2007, p. 65). Now, there seems to be less space for the other to say 'hello' or a name as a response, even though all involved actors delicately and simultaneously pay respect to how an everyday conversation normally 'should' be done. There is no determinism in actual talk (or other interaction), but its participants usually recognize its sequential orders, thereby also reproducing them.

Conversation analysis has the advantage of working with recorded data, which allows the kind of fine-grained sequential analysis that both Silverman and Sacks advocate. However, the spirit of sequentiality can undoubtedly be translated into more inexact sets of data, which, on the other hand, has other advantages. Harnett is 'there' in a nursing home, able to capture its routinized tempo in the morning, the alarm that goes off, and even the smell of urine in Charlie's room (cf. Gubrium's, 1975/1997, similar approach in his pioneering work in nursing home ethnography). So, even though she does not tape-record Charlie's request and Tina's response, her data have sensory and contextual qualities.

Could we talk about a 'slot' during which Tina's help to get Charlie out of bed was 'invited' to happen, a slot that was passed and then 'closed' when Tina asked him to wait? Residents at nursing homes seem to strive to

make use of quite ordinary structured openings for receiving 'extra' help and improvised exemptions – the caring work's 'slots' – whereas staff make use of institutional routines to close them.

If we go back to my field notes on play-fights in the youth care institution, there is a peculiar detail at the end of the sequence with Ted and Hugo in the workshop. Hugo, the teacher, 'checks his trousers and shirt, as if trying to make sure they did not get spoiled somehow'. When analyzing playfights sequentially, I also tried to attend to what could happen after a 'core' sequence. Youth and staff could enjoy the aftermath of a play-fight – breathless, relaxed and happy – yet, there were also traces of seriousness here, as when Hugo checks his clothes. By attending to those things, I was trying to show how members restore their institutional membership after having suspended it. We may talk about a sort of coda; that is, the post-narrative stage at which storytellers return to the present day and its reality (Labov, 1972, pp. 362–73; Riessman, 2008, p. 84).

So, observing sequences may also mean observing their aftermath and how it retrospectively contextualizes the events. In the case of Ted and Hugo, we might say that even though institutional members bracket their formal roles during playful interaction, they also accomplish subtle linkages between play and seriousness.

The narrative term 'coda' also reminds us about another benefit of observing sequences: it tends to make field notes powerfully story-like. A minimal story, according to structuralists such as Labov (1972, pp. 360–1), is a sequence of at least two clauses: first this happened, then that. If storytellers lack any such succession of events, where one thing leads to another, there is not much of a story to begin with. If, on the other hand, storytellers get their bearings with various sequences, they also find the necessary ingredients for their stories.

Therefore, by observing sequences, researchers gather data that are often relatively

fun to communicate. There is of course a risk that, as Emerson and his colleagues point out (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 16), a narrative form could ‘push’ open-ended or disjointed interactions into seemingly coherent sequences. There is certainly nothing inherently invaluable with episodic and fragmented observations. However, if we look upon ‘sequence’ in the spirit of Harvey Sacks and David Silverman, we know that the ‘stories’ they indicate are anything but necessarily neat or complete. People may talk in disrupted and quirky ways, and the same thing goes for all human interactions.

### ***Atmosphere***

Atmosphere is the final attractive quality for observers that I want to highlight. The mostly wordless or elusive qualities in settings and situations are also desirable to distinguish when collecting observational data: the mood, the ‘air’ or tone of a social context. To be present in a field, and situated among the people who populate one’s research, gives the researcher a good opportunity to sense aspects of an emotional and cultural milieu that others may have great trouble in reaching.

This may sound cryptic. Sensing ‘the atmosphere’, how do observers do it? Without any ambition to be all encompassing, I suggest two ways: contrasts and synecdoche. By distinguishing contrasting atmospheres in a given field (or, if possible, between different fields), each atmosphere may turn surprisingly clear, even when they may still appear quite elusive individually. Then, by treating details in observations as synecdoches – a rhetorical form where a part stands for the whole – we may similarly get a handle on what anthropologists sometimes call the ‘ether’ of a setting.

In my studies at youth care institutions, I have gradually realized that I have gathered data on two contrasting atmospheres: on the one hand: wards, on the other hand: schoolrooms or school buildings. The institutions

are often constructed as ‘cottage systems’ in the countryside (Platt, 1969/1977), which means that each ward consists of a house or cottage in which a group of teenagers sleep and spend most of their time. Each institution harbors a series of such houses or cottages, in addition to school buildings, workshops, garages and often a central building with administration, a central kitchen, a large dining hall, and so forth. Staff and youth wander between houses and in corridors according to schedules, especially between school and wards.

At some institutions, youth are placed in separate school buildings during their lessons; at others they just walk to separate rooms within their ward house. In any case, school is separate from wards, as are their respective atmospheres. Whereas a ward appears to be a mixture between a prison, a boarding school and a recreation center, school areas are more cognitively and pedagogically oriented.

At the center of a ward, there is a TV and a generous sofa or a couple of comfortable armchairs. At the center of a schoolroom, there is a work table and a series of computers. A ward harbors video games and DVDs, and the youth sort of lie on the sofa or slumber in front of endless TV shows, in otherwise quite stripped living rooms. In schoolrooms, they sit up straight in front of screens, whiteboards, bookshelves, maps, posters and paintings. When the youth walk from one area to another, from wards with their laid-back mood of ‘we’re just doing time here, despite the fact that staff calls it therapy’ to the learning expectations among the teachers, they also shift atmosphere. They may very well engage in sabotage toward pedagogical ambitions (Wästerfors, 2014, pp. 236–65), but a single institution entails different moods in and of itself.

My point is that the contrast between wards and school helped me to identify atmospheres. As youth wander from one area to another, I do the same as a fieldworker. I feel the expectation to sit up straight myself as I enter schoolrooms, and I feel the

expectation to relax and be more spontaneous in the wards. Yet I do not think I would have been able to distinguish these things without a contrast. Indeed, the contrast has helped me to communicate to outsiders the 'air' or tone of youth care institutions.

Also, synecdoches help observers to capture atmospheres, or more specifically: the ethnographer's openness to look upon his or her data in synecdochal ways (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983/2007, p. 198). A range of details from my examples in this chapter can be reviewed from this perspective: the blue overalls in the workshop where Ted and Hugo's playfight takes place, the 'rank smell of urine' in Charlie's room in the nursing home, the sofa in a youth care ward, the alarm equipment that its staff members carry, and so on. Each of these things can be picked up from field notes or memories, and made to stand for something wider – and to communicate this 'something wider', the observer can drop them strategically into his or her texts.

The blue overalls, for instance, stand for 'workshop' and 'labor', as well as the corresponding mood; youth care institutions have a long tradition of celebrating supposedly educational physical labor for troubled youth. The sofa, on the other hand, stands for comfort, relaxation and coziness, as well as for therapeutic talks. A 'rank smell of urine' in Harnett's notes, seems to stand for an emotional state of physical emergency and vulnerability.

In one of my notes from the youth care institutions, I tried to document the occasional atmosphere of panic or turmoil when the alarm would ring out over all the buildings. I could see how one boy was standing in front of a closed door with a window, hitting the door repeatedly. People around me were asking 'What's happening?!', 'What's happening?!' I wrote that, and added 'I can feel the adrenaline hit me', and 'How the hell do I switch off this beeping device [the alarm telephone for staff] that I've borrowed?!'

In another ethnographic project in which I was studying a leisure activity for youth with disabilities (Wästerfors, 2008), I tried to communicate an atmosphere of 'doing normalcy'.

These teenagers all had various diagnoses (Asperger's, autism, ADHD, etc.), and were used to being treated according to them, but the leisure activity was characterized by a very down-to-earth and simultaneously upfront mood. The activity had the form of a motor club. It took place in and around a garage, and the boys slowly repaired an old American car.

In the beginning, I had difficulties capturing the mundane and seemingly uneventful atmosphere (definitely far away from cases of panic in youth care institutions). I started to attend to what I later called 'doing normalcy' with the help of the field members' ironic yet still warm jargon. Participants were not treated as clients or patients, or as objects to feel sorry for, and such features of the setting were deeply appreciated and continuously reproduced:

Dennis's mom arrives during coffee at the end of the night and one of the leaders talks with her. 'We don't like Dennis anymore', he says, loudly so that everybody hears. 'Really, what's he done now?' the mom answers, picking up the leader's irony. 'He wins too much.' 'Well, what's he been winning?' The leader tells about the competitions [that took place earlier]; Dennis is listening with great interest, as if he wondered how far the irony could be taken. 'Well, it was fun as long as it lasted,' Dennis's mom says and pretends to finish his membership by reaching out her hand to Dennis, as if preparing to leave with him. 'Two times I won', Dennis says a little later, whereupon the leader sighs, 'Yes, we knooow!' evoking everybody's laughter.

Again, my point is not to present these notes as ideal. Rather, the point is that details and sequences (and many other observable aspects, like objects, architecture, geographical positions and rituals) can be treated as synecdoches, making them stand for something relatively elusive. Through concrete facets of talk and gestures, and through small dramas in story-like formats, we can get a glimpse of a setting's ether. The atmosphere of the motor club that I was observing did not resemble a formal program or clinic for young people with disabilities, and joking episodes could be used to show that.

Basically all ethnographic data is synecdochal, as Hammersley and Atkinson state

(1983/2007, p. 198). Observers routinely select particular features as characteristic of places, persons or events. Examples are used in ways similar to oral rhetoric, as ‘shortened induction’ (Wästerfors and Holsánová, 2005). Still, this rhetorical effect must be slowly and wisely carved out to really make it shine.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I started by presenting the general aims of observations, the theoretical assumptions of this approach and the historical background. I then discussed three qualities – details, sequences and atmosphere – that may be especially helpful for observers in basically any project. Qualifications and disclaimers introduced my discussion; what type of observation you need depends on the project. We cannot give general advice for all observers in all projects, as if providing a universal scheme to hold up in front of one’s eyes as one enters any field. There is no shortcut, in this respect. Each observer has to use his or her personal experiences while seeking out the opportunities that characterize each setting. Each observer has to find a way to map the woods, as Silverman (2007, p. 63) terms it (after MacNaghten and Myers, 2004), and get some preliminary overview of the terrain, before he or she starts focusing, ‘chopping up trees’.

If an observer did not look for details, sequences and atmosphere, how would the data appear? We would probably then find ourselves with notes like, ‘They went into a boring room and started an argument’. Without ambition to specify or unfold what is taking place, and without ambition to somehow communicate a tone or ‘air’ of the moment, much data would appear as dumb, mute or inarticulate. It would be quite similar, I guess, to our prejudices about this or that.

What we normally observe in our everyday life are reproductions of what ‘everybody knows’. We see ‘types’ of people, we hear predictable conversations, and we experience

highly recognizable events. The trick of making observations for analytic and theoretical purposes is to employ ethnographers’ trained gaze and refined rhetoric to transport oneself around simplifications, summaries and generalizations, and instead get at something different. That is why we need original details, surprising sequences and innovative paths to show atmospheres.

We also need these qualities, I would argue, to set greater entities in social science in motion. A common objection against ethnographic data concerns the tension between an ‘experience-near’ approach, and ‘theories about the effects of broader social structures’ (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 134). Power, gender, age, class, disability and ethnicity, for instance, may at first sight seem to evaporate in the richness of descriptions. We see all these social worlds, but do we see through them?

My argument to nuance this tension is two-fold. First, to theorize starts by naming phenomena, and for that we need observations (Swedberg, 2012) – not necessarily ‘given’ names from others’ theories. Our gaze must be theoretically informed, but not theoretically programmed. In that sense we may be richly rewarded if we do not take for granted prefabricated ways to ‘see through’ things. Second, wider structuring processes – such as power, gender, class, age, disability and ethnicity – can be dynamically described and better explained by observing them in every day life, especially their details, their sequences and atmospheres. And if we spend time in a field we may very well find out that these processes do not need to be as ‘experience-distant’ as others might have told us. Society is here and now – in front of our eyes – and observations may help us create new knowledge out of that.

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