INFO 272. Qualitative Research Methods

Participant-Observation

Fall 2014

Review: Sampling, Selection, Corpus Construction
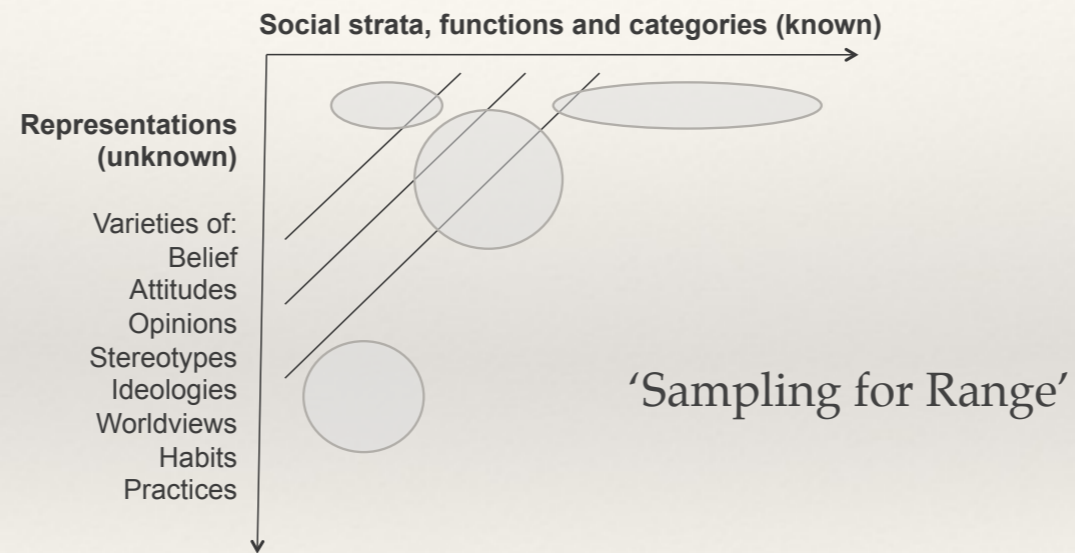
Approaches to Sampling Populations

❖ Total enumeration (i.e. census)

❖ Statistical random sample

❖ Snowball sample (*iteration* again)

❖ Convenience sample (bad)

a snowball sample is not a convenience sample.

There should always be some sound logic you can point to in your process of 'selecting' people for interviews

a 'biased' sample? Not really a salient way to talk about a sample…rather (as Small notes) your sample is a set of cases with particular characteristics

The challenge of mapping unknowable populations

Systematic Population Selection

How do I know when to stop?

- Iteration until Saturation

- Don't collect too much data [logistical limits]

In Conclusion - Representativeness?

❖ Not with 'small-n'

❖ The problem of unknowable populations

❖ **Rather than 'representativeness'** we are **seeking** to grasp the **range** and **diversity** in the social phenomenon under study

❖ For what purpose? Challenging notions of what is 'natural' or 'universal' about a phenomenon – theory <u>building</u> rather than theory <u>testing/refinement</u>

Field Notes as 'Selection from Observation'

Selection from Observation

❖ Description (in field notes) is a selection from what is observed – we do this implicitly [Becker]

❖ **Filtering** doesn't mean fictional (see Lofland and Lofland, pg. 68)

❖ **Technique -** If it is done well, conscientiously, creates new categories and ideas that 'get around conventional thinking'

"what we see is inevitably shaped by the fact that we are languaged; by our spatial, temporal, and social locations (by culture, history, status); by our occupational or other idiosyncratic concerns; and especially relevant here, by the scholarly discipline within which our 'looking' takes place.

How to Observe (2 Impossible Tasks)

1. Evenly distributed attention

2. Direct observation and description *without interpretation* as a way to challenge conventional thinking, discover new categories, concepts

When relying on observation alone <u>be very careful</u> about imputing motives, general mind-reading.

"seeing is forgetting the name of the thing we are looking at" – Robert Morris, visual artist

"Careful description of details, unfiltered by our ideas and theories, produces observations that, not fitting these categories, require us to create new ideas and categories into which they can be fitted without forcing." - Becker

How do we gain access to the motives of another person? Always a challenge because we exist outside of the people we study and can only have access to what is going on in their minds through some process of communication – what they tell us about their motives. Observation can also suggest something about motives. People may tell you one thing and then behave in a way that suggests otherwise. All of this gives you some (necessarily incomplete and imperfect) picture of that person from your position outside of them.

How to Participate

Varying degrees:

❖ 'going native' at the extreme

❖ striking a balance between insider and outsider

❖ Researchers role as *translator*

We can't get into that other person's mind to know what exactly their thought process, motives are.

But you can participate and subject yourself to the same situation to observe what goes on in your own mind – which is not precisely the same thing, but is perhaps another useful perspective.

How to Record Field Notes

❖ when? as soon as possible

❖ where? somewhere unobtrusive

❖ what? – "a running description of events, people, things heard and overheard, conversations among people, conversations with people." – [Lofland and Lofland]

❖ KEY IDEA: Log more data than you know you will need (*to support an inductive analytical approach*)

How to Record Field Notes

Best Practices	Technique
separate direct **observation** from **inference** as best you can	Put inference/interpretation in brackets [] or in a separate column
distinguish between direct quotes and paraphrasing	"" for direct quotes and ' ' for paraphrasing
all the specifics	date, time, place names, names and contact info for people
not limited to text	drawings, maps, tape small papers into your notebook such as business cards, flyers, etc.

Jottings vs. Full Field Notes
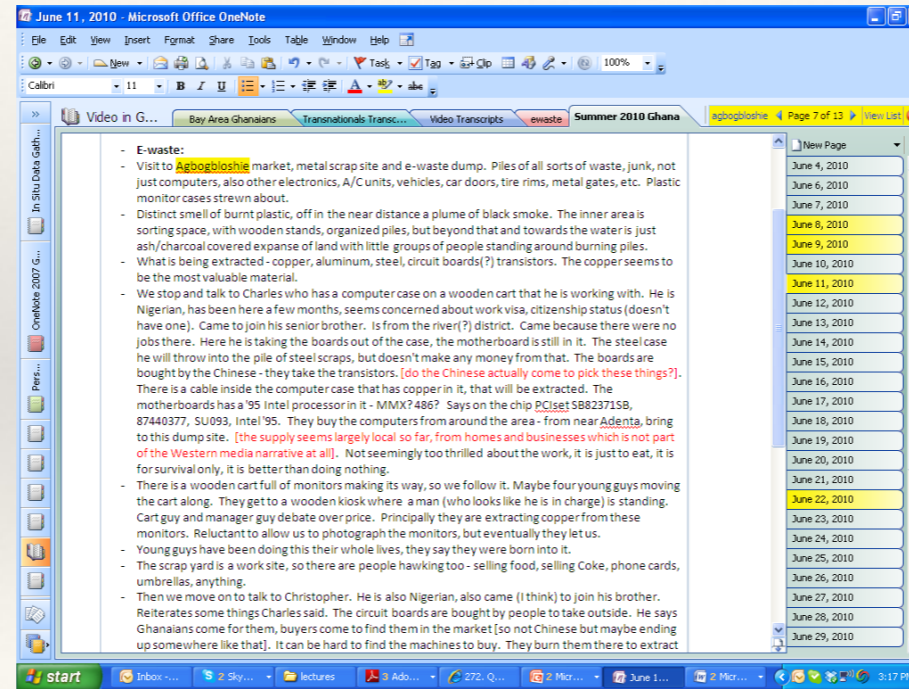
Assignment 1

1. Practice evenly distributing your attention

2. Practice breaking down your observation into the most basic descriptions (and distinguish this from your interpretations)

3. Practice recording more data than you think is relevant

4. Practice thinking iteratively

5. Bonus points for approaching and engaging strangers in your quest to understand the social setting

Sites

- 1) Library, sites of public Internet access, McDonalds?

- 2) public transport — BART (ticketing, kiosk), on the platform, on the train, buses, bus stops

- 3) restaurants, bars, eateries