

# Encyclopedia of Case Study Research

## Field Notes

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Field notes are the data collection technique for making field work into a case study that has utility in teaching and training. Without proper field notes, the translation of field work into a case study cannot be successful.

## Conceptual Overview and Discussion

Taking down field notes is the act of recording one's research data as well as the beginning of communicating one's research findings with others. The creation of a permanent record of events, interviews, interpretations, and ideas allows researchers to be clear about what they think they know. Often, in the course of discussing field work as a methodological tool, people wonder how spending time in a particular place with particular people [p. 397 ↓] enabled the researcher to come to the conclusion that he or she understands something about them that they may not themselves admit to understanding. Few of us can claim to really understand our own neighbors. However, as trained professionals engaging in field work, case study researchers keep field notes and rely heavily on them as a primary source of data. Through taking down a description of an event, they create the record of an event. As Clifford Geertz describes it, case study researchers inscribe social discourse, turning it from a passing event, existing only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reviewed at a later time.

There is an air of mystery surrounding field notes and what they should contain. Should field notes be a glorified diary, including the researcher's personal feelings, struggles and desires? For some, making note of any personal issue is important in that it might come to shed light on a particular phase of research. For others, keeping a research-based field notebook along with a separate, more personal journal is preferred.

The posthumous publishing of Bronislaw Malinowski's diary in 1967 brought this discussion to the fore of many social science debates. A founding father of anthropology, Malinowski was seen in full exposure, his personal thoughts and desires laid bare in a way he certainly had never intended. His notes and data were full of great depth and breadth and led to the publication of highly respected monographs in the discipline. These portrayed him as a man struggling through both culture shock and

assimilation who frankly documented his feelings, which many in a similar circumstance and point in time may have shared. Some see this as a clear showing of the complexity of the human experiences and human beings involved.

## Application

Field notes can take many forms. There are the random jottings that take place when one walks from village house to village house or the notes made at a café where one sits between interviews. Some of these notes are descriptive, focusing on the physical space, the mannerisms of the people present, the sounds, smells, and duration of events. Others are merely words taken down to jog one's memory later when one expands on earlier notes. They should be written, expanded upon, reviewed, added to, and reviewed again. For those more accustomed with a natural science model for research, this may sound strange. If field notes are a researcher's data, then how could a researcher add to them, expand on them, "change" them? Well, the techniques of observing and participating require that researchers note their findings through those field work activities and that they do so in a way that will enable them to write their theses later and provide the data to support their findings. Rudi Colloredo-Mansfeld, in his account of economic and artistic life in Ecuador, engagingly describes his note taking and data collection in Otavalo. Colloredo-Mansfeld not only relies on his written documentation of life in the artisan community, but also sketches scenes of the culture around him, thereby opening himself up as an artist and researcher in the community. Because his field notes included detailed descriptions of household goods, the sketches acted as both a field note and also as a pictorial representation of his jottings. When Alma Gottlieb and Philip Graham were in a West African village, as anthropologist and writer/partner they had multiple encounters with their need to record their experiences. Gottlieb describes her desperation to begin her orderly and systematic collection of field notes by following the census model of her advisor only to find that simple questions, and hoping for simple answers to develop into real field notes, is often easier said than done. Field workers find through their interactions with ethnographic and fiction writing that taking down reality amounts to more than simple notes.

Researchers engaged in field work must familiarize themselves with the different ideas and forms of note taking before beginning their research. Similar to the case

study providing a template for thought, learning, and action, studying various methods of taking field notes can provide a menu of options for the researcher standing in a field site with an empty notebook. Yet like most elements of field work, the successful method for each individual will come only through individual experience. Through trial and error, a system is born. However, by always striving to maintain both breadth and depth in one's notes, the resulting data will create a more well-informed case study.

The breadth of field notes often comes from the breadth of the project itself. If one gathers data for 12 months in the field, it is likely that the [p. 398 ↓ ] field notes will include information on many facets of the particular culture, not just those that fall directly into the research program. However, if one is to be in the field for only a month or two, then the field notes will likely be more narrowly focused on the specific research questions at hand. In the latter instance, one might have to sacrifice breadth for depth. Focusing as much as possible on the area of research will result in notes reflecting greater detail in a smaller area of focus. Breadth can also come from the work a researcher does to expand on earlier notes or ideas. This may include reflections on other academics' research, questions that might connect the present research with the research of others in another discipline, or conversations with locals about areas that might seem to fall outside of the area of focus. In this way, field notes should not be only journalistic jottings of one's observations, but should also include those immediate thoughts, questions, or realizations one comes to while engaged in the research process. Summaries of the research and thoughts about it can be very useful when taken as an overall log over time. This is why taking time to reflect on one's notes is so critical. Through reflection and review of one's field notes, connections can be made and the data may begin to form a picture of the case study that will result. Even though the data are present within a researcher's field notes, it is nevertheless the researcher's job to organize, translate, and present them.

These days there are many options for individual researchers who want to record their field notes directly into a computer. While many field work settings make such a process challenging, some researchers find it easier to create word processing documents immediately while doing field work. Researchers often construct databases to manage their field notes. They select appropriate categories for classifying the data. For example, a cultural anthropologist might set up specific categories for kinship terms, religious taboos, plants, social networks, and so on. These data can then easily be

retrieved for analysis. Some researchers rely on tape recorders or digital recorders for their interviews or field notes. However, most field workers would find it safer to transfer the information off of such recording devices as soon as possible after collecting the interview. Regardless of the kind of technology a researcher uses to collect and store field notes, the utmost care must be taken to keep the data safe.

D. W. Plath describes the underanalyzed aspect of what he calls “filed notes” and the amount of work that comes after one collects data in the form of field notes. He persuasively argues that social scientists have not given enough critical attention to the act of working with and making use of field notes. Often the necessary data are extracted and the rest is left forgotten. Plath also argues that if more time was spent with field notes, the resulting analyses and case studies would be greatly improved. Gathering all of one's field notes together and studying them, perhaps along with any personal journals, can be invaluable for seeing the evolution of one's ideas. This active reflexivity enables researchers to examine their cultural and epistemological positions. While great attention should be given to the act of taking and the quality of field notes, there must also be serious attention given to the processing of all of the field notes after data collection is complete.

## Critical Summary

Field notes comprise the data gathered in field work. Therefore, critical attention should be paid to the personal methods one employs in creating a field log and how one will strive to ensure appropriate depth and breadth in one's field notes. Because the field work situation is fluid and unpredictable, researchers must make every effort to make good use of their time and maintain the highest quality field notes possible. Once back at the desk, the field notes come to act as a guide. Through critical reflection and attention to one's field notes, the best possible case study will result.

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See also

### Further Readings

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