Welcome to the presentation on fieldnotes! There are several things we will accomplish in this brief screencast, I've included them as learning objectives.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this screencast, you will be able to:

- Understand what fieldnotes are
- Determine when and how to take fieldnotes
- Identify appropriate content for fieldnotes
- Distinguish between description and reflection in fieldnotes

Fieldnotes

Here is a brief overview of what fieldnotes are. Some of these concepts will be examined in greater detail throughout the presentation.

**Fieldnotes are what Spradley calls an "ethnographic record." What this means is that fieldnotes are the record of your fieldwork that provides a description of the "culture" you're working with for your study. Fieldnotes are most often taken during observations, but a researcher could also take fieldnotes for other research methods. For example, during an interview or focus group to either compliment an audio recording or serve as the data set if an interviewee or focus group member declines to be audio recorded. Flick (2019) explains that fieldnotes taken during interviews should "contain the essentials of the interviewee's answers and information about the proceeding of the interview" (p. 340).

In this presentation, we will focus on fieldnotes for observations.

**In fieldnotes, the researcher attempts to make a detailed record that includes rich description of the setting and situation they observed. Researchers attempt to write down what people do, what people say, and the objects they use in the observed event. In fieldnotes, researchers work to be as detailed about the context of the observation as possible.

**Bogdan & Biklen (2016) explain that the success of a study, particularly one that relies on observations, is determined by the details and accurate information included in fieldnotes. Fieldnotes are more than this though, their content can be much more comprehensive and researchers can write fieldnotes or memos that track goings on throughout every stage of the study. They explain, "Fieldnotes can provide any study with a personal log that helps the researcher keep track of the development of the project, to visualize how the research plan has been affected by the data collected, and to remain aware of how he or she has been influenced by the data" (p. 116).

The Mechanics of Taking Fieldnotes

**Researchers may take fieldnotes by hand or electronically. However, if you take fieldnotes by hand while in the field, Bogdan and Biklen (2016) recommend all researchers type their expanded fieldnote accounts when the observation is over. Furthermore, they encourage researchers to develop a plan for storing and organizing fieldnotes and other qualitative data collected during a study from the outset of this project and to follow this plan to the end of the study. Using technology in these ways allows a researcher to have a more streamlined analysis process.

**Each time a researcher enters the field for an observation, a new set of fieldnotes should be taken. This means that researchers don't have one document with pages of pages of fieldnotes from all the observations they've conducted throughout a study.

**At the beginning of every set of fieldnotes, researchers to write front matter that provides brief details of where and when the observation occurred. This front matter could include the location, time, date, set up of observation site, participants in attendance, etc.

**Finally, some researchers will draw an image of the set up of the observation site. This helps in recall for provide details necessary in the fieldnotes. Researchers may also take pictures of the site. Pictures are usually taken with the consent of the site organizers. They also will not typically have participants in the pictures unless express consent has been given.

Content of Fieldnotes

According to Spradley, there are 4 types of fieldnotes.

**The first is the condensed account. This is taken while a researcher is in the field during which time they attempt to jot down as much about the scene as possible. This includes what they see participants do, what tools they use, and direct quotes of what they say. In the early stages of observations, when researchers are still conducting descriptive observations, these condensed accounts should be as comprehensive and broad as possible. These versions are an account of what the researcher witnessed and, because it's impossible to write down everything, often these accounts include "phrases, single words, and unconnected sentences" (p. 69). Researchers attempt to record key activities and phrases during these accounts.

**As soon as possible after the observation has ended and the researcher leaves the field, the researcher "should fill in details and recall things that were not recorded on the spot" (pp. 69-70). The expanded account is a detailed narrative of the observation, a time when the researcher uses rich description to bring what they observed alive in writing. Think of the expanded account as the time when the researcher writes a comprehensive story detailing the scene they witnessed. When reading the account, researchers should feel transported back to the scene and if others read the account they should feel as if they were there themselves. These accounts show the researchers voice, require detailed recall, and have a touch of creative writing to them.

**It may also be helpful for researchers to keep a fieldwork journal where they can draw the scene in front of them and keep a "record of experiences, ideas, fears, mistakes, confusions, breakthroughs, and problems that arise during fieldwork. A journal represents the personal side of fieldwork; it includes reactions to informants and feelings you sense from others" (p. 71).

**Finally, researchers may use fieldnotes as a form of analysis and interpretation. This type of fieldnotes would not be attached to a particular observation (or even type of research method) but would allow the researcher a time to take a deeper look at their data and what may be becoming clear to them throughout the research process. Spradley describes this type of fieldnotes as a time for "generalizations, analysis of cultural meanings, interpretations, and insights" into what is being studied (p. 72). This type of fieldnotes may be called memos, analysis memos, or the like and is where researchers begin the analysis process. They are often written during data generation and allow a researcher to track their interpretations and analytical thinking from the outset of the data collection period and into an analysis period.

Description vs. Reflection

In expanded and condensed accounts, the content of fieldnotes can be organized into two different areas, description and reflection.

**Descriptive fieldnotes are a time where a researcher describes a scene in as much detail as possible. Much of what was discussed earlier in this presentation would be included in the descriptive fieldnote category. This is the majority of the content of fieldnotes and the researcher attempts to objectively and accurately describe what they witnessed during the observation. It is important during descriptive accounts to be clear, do not use abstract wording or phrasing, and provide detail of what was witnessed rather than the researcher's assessment of what was witnessed. This aspect of fieldnotes is not a summarization, but a detailed account in chronological order of what happened. Researchers write what people were actually doing or saying. Researchers provide accounts of what people looked like, what the dialogue was, what the setting looked or felt like, the activities they observed, and even their own behavior.

**As an example of appropriate detail, Bogdan and Biklen provide these two snippets from fieldnotes: Instead of writing "The child looked a mess," the researcher should be more specific. What made the researcher characterize that child as a "mess?" More appropriate to fieldnotes would be, "The child, who was seven or eight years old, wore faded, muddy dungarees with both knees ripped. His nose was running in a half inch stream down to his mouth, and his face was streaked clean where he had rubbed it with his wet fingers."

**Researchers will also take reflective fieldnotes. These reflective fieldnotes are what Spradley recommends keeping in a fieldwork journal. In reflective fieldnotes, researchers include a more personal account of or from the observation. This type of fieldnotes can be taken during the observation or after.

**If they're recorded during the observation, they should be distinguished from the descriptive account in formatting (perhaps through italization, underlining, or separation into another paragraph with a label "reflection"). This would be a time where a researcher would provide assessment, wonderings, or considerations of the possible meaning of what they witnessed. Bogdan and Biklen call reflections made during the observation "observer's comments" (p. 119). This would be phrases, sentences, or short paragraphs during which time a researcher records their thought process during the observation.

**If recorded after the completion of the observation, these reflective fieldnotes could be compiled into a memo. These memos would be longer reflections and would be an opportunity for a researcher to keep their description and their reflection separate. Researcher would think about upcoming or current analysis, how they've conducted their study and if any changes are warranted, their own behavior in the study and how that may be impacting the trajectory of the study, ethical issues, and questions or inquiry they have to consider moving forward.

References

Fieldnotes are an integral form of data in a qualitative research project, particularly for projects that use observations as a data generation method. Fieldnotes are descriptive, reflective, and analytical. They are versatile, and learning to take good fieldnotes is a necessary skill in the qualitative researcher's arsenal.

Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2016). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods* (5th ed.). India: Pearson.

Flick, U. (2019). *An introduction to qualitative research* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Spradley, J. P. (1980). *Participant observation.* Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.