# FIELD NOTES: GENERATION AND ANALYSIS

Much qualitative educational research relies on participant-observation as one data generation technique. Each researcher develops his or her own style of recording field notes, but one common characteristic is that the researcher attempts to refrain from making judgements or interpretations in the notes themselves. Researchers attempt to keep the field notes as "objective" and factual as possible and add interpretations, judgmenets, questions, and other comments in documents called memos or in another part of the notes specifically set aside for such a purpose. Some researchers use a two column method where they record notes in one column and judgments and reflections in the other.

Two very brief examples of field notes follow. One is an example of poor field notes and the other is a more appropriate section of field notes. Can you tell which is which?

Example 1:

It is the first day of school. The mother and child approach the school from the car. The daughter is terrified and begins wailing. The mother, fearful herself, tries to calm down the child by hugging her and telling her not to cry.

Example 2:

It is the first day of school. A woman and child exit a car parked in front of the school building and approach the school on foot. The child begins to cry and shout. The woman hugs the child, saying, "Shhh, honey. Try not to cry. It'll be OK."

In the first example, the observer is making multiple assumptions—that the woman and child are related, that the child is "terrified", that the mother is fearful, etc. In the second example, the observer tries to record things exactly as they happen, even to recording what individuals actually said. The author does not speculate about things he or she does not know. The observer can speculate about these things in another column, another part of the notebook, or in separate documents. The field notes are kept as clean and "objective" as possible so that they can be read and reread and interpreted in a variety of ways.

Once researchers have generated their data (field notes, interviews, etc.) they must make sense of it. Researchers read their data multiple times to spot themes. Most often they also employ systems to make sure the data really supports the theme. One common system is coding. The researcher may decide ahead of time if he or she is "looking for" particular concepts, behaviors, etc. and develop their codes accordingly or they may engage in open coding where the codes develop based on the data. By examining the codes, the researcher can get a sense of how often a particular phenomenon occurs, in what contexts different things happen, etc. to make sense of the phenomenon.

An example of coded field notes follows:

| Notes | Interpretations/Questions |
|---|---|
| It is the first day of school. A woman and child exit a car parked in front of the school building and approach the school on foot. The child begins to cry and shout. The woman hugs the child, saying, "Shhh, honey. Try not to cry. It'll be OK." The two continue up the sidewalk and enter the building. Another woman is standing inside the door to the building. She approaches the first woman and child and says "Hi! I'm Ms. Sanders, the kindergarten teacher. Is this one of our new students?" The woman says "Yes, this is Mandy. I'm Mandy's mom Kathy." Ms. Sanders squats and looks into Mandy's eyes and says, "We're going to have fun today. I know you'll make a lot of new friends." | Is the girl scared? The woman calls her "honey"—related? Affectionate relationship? Mother?<br><br>Yes, mother relationship.<br><br>Teacher gets down to student's level—means what? |

You'll usually need a list or "code book" to keep track of what the codes mean when you make them. The short code book for this excerpt might look like this:

C=comfort
F=fear
SL=social learning

If my project is about how children's emotional lives affect their learning I may have come up with these codes ahead of time. If I am simply analyzing the incident and trying to see what emerges, I may have applied these codes as I read and reread the data and after analyzing the entire data set will identify themes and make sense of them. (This type of study and analysis is usually called "grounded theory").

You may do either of these with your grocery store project—you may identify a question or theory ahead of time and analyze your data according to it, or you may begin with no preconceived notions and see what the data "tells" you. These themes or ideas that emerge from the data, and your interpretations (what does this mean to you?), are discussed in your write up.