In the Field

An Introduction to Field Research

ROUTLEDGE

Robert G. Burgess

8

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CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL RESEARCH SERIES

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An Introduction to Field Research

ROBERT G.BURGESS

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Contents

For Hilary

Series Editor's Preface

The structure of the social sciences combines two separate elements, theory and empirical evidence. Both are necessary for successful social understanding; one without the other is barren. The *Contemporary Social Research* series is concerned with the means by which this structure is maintained and kept standing solid and upright, a job performed by the methodology of social research.

The series is intended to provide concise introductions to significant methodological topics. Broadly conceived, research methodology deals with the general grounds for the validity of social scientific propositions. How do we know what we do know about the social world? More narrowly, it deals with the questions: how do we actually acquire new knowledge about the world in which we live? What are the strategies and techniques by means of which social science data are collected and analysed? The series will seek to answer such questions through the examination of specific areas of methodology.

Why is such a series necessary? There exist many solid, indeed massive, methodology textbooks, which most undergraduates in sociology, psychology and the social sciences acquire familiarity with in the course of their studies. The aim of this series is different. It focuses upon specific topics, procedures, methods of analysis and methodological problems to provide a readable introduction to its subject. Each book contains annotated suggestions for further reading. The intended audience includes the advanced under-graduate, the graduate student, working social researchers seeking to familiarise themselves with new areas, and non-specialists who wish to enlarge their knowledge of social research. Research methodology need not be remote and inaccessible. Some prior knowledge of statistics will be useful, but only certain titles in the series will make strong statistical demands upon the reader. The series is concerned above all to demonstrate the general importance and centrality of research methodology to social science.

In the Field, by Robert Burgess, complements the author's earlier anthology in this series, *Field Research: a Sourcebook and Field Manual* (1982), which has been well received. *In the Field* provides a more detailed and focused treatment of the central topics of field research, drawing extensively upon the author's own experience of doing research in a secondary school. He provides a comprehensive overview of this style of research, together with numerous suggestions for further reading, both methodological and substantive.

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Preface

Sociological research was, at one time, closely identified with survey methods, while anthropological research was based upon intensive studies using field methods including participant observation. Such a sharp dichotomy between the research practice and research procedures of these two disciplines no longer exists, for sociologists are as likely to use field methods as anthropologists are to engage in survey work. Furthermore, members of both disciplines now increasingly focus attention on the study of their own culture using a range of research strategies and methods. Accordingly, intensive studies using field methods are now conducted in urban-industrial settings such as factories, hospitals, prisons, schools and classrooms.

Alongside these developments in research, more courses and seminars are devoted to field research, drawing on vast bodies of American literature and utilising American textbooks. For there is relatively little British material that brings together a discussion of the literature with practical examples drawn from the study of British society. This book is, therefore, an attempt to begin to fill this gap. However, it is not intended to be an encyclopaedic coverage of the literature on field methods. Instead, like its companion volume *Field Research: a Sourcebook and Field Manual* (Burgess, 1982a) it covers some of the main issues and problems involved in field research. The aim is to provide insights on the research process while raising critical issues on field methods to which any researcher needs sensitising. In turn, this leads into a consideration of the relationship between the principles and practice of field research together with a discussion of the conduct and evaluation of field studies. There is also a guide to some of the literature on field research through the annotated reading lists at the end of each chapter and the complete list of references at the end of the book.

I have written this book with a number of audiences in mind. First, undergraduates, postgraduates and researchers in sociology and social anthropology who are coming to field research for the first time. Secondly, students who are conducting field studies in their own society. Thirdly, students who are required to evaluate field studies and who seek to understand the conduct of field research. I hope they will all find material here which will go some way towards promoting discussion and dialogue about the conduct of field research in urban-industrial settings.

In writing this book I have drawn on a range of empirical examples including my own field experiences while conducting research in an urban comprehensive school. I would, therefore, like to thank once more the teachers and pupils in 'my school' who not only co-operated with my study but also helped to advance my understanding of the problems and processes involved in doing field research.

I am indebted to a number of friends and colleagues who have provided me with much assistance. In particular, I would like to thank Martin Bulmer, Marjorie Lodge, Virginia Olesen and Marten Shipman who were kind enough to read and offer advice on the complete manuscript, while Alison Andrew, Eileen Fairhurst, Janet Finch and Wyn Lewis commented on particular chapters. My wife, Hilary, gave me much encouragement

Introduction

Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight. Since you take up your abode in the compound of some neighbouring white man, trader or missionary, you have nothing to do, but to start at once on your ethnographic work. Imagine further that you are a beginner, without previous experience, with nothing to guide you and no one to help you. For the white man is temporarily absent, or else unable or unwilling to waste any of his time on you. This exactly describes my first initiation into field work on the south coast of New Guinea. (Malinowski, 1922, p. 4)

Imagine a large, stately Edwardian building set in pleasant grounds on a hill top in an expensive residential suburb. Go through the green double doors into a panelled hall, and up the spiral staircase to the first floor. Follow the panelled corridor to the north-east corner of the building, and enter the room situated there. It is cold. The central heating must either be faulty, or someone has turned it down very low. There are four large windows facing north and east, so the room is light but not sunny. The walls are pale yellow, with a photographic reproduction of the Parthenon frieze round near the ceiling. One wall is lined with locked cupboards, and the glass-fronted bookcases are also locked. Two notice-boards display information about forthcoming events to raise charitable funds and instructions in case of fire, power cuts or illness. It is very quiet. No one in the room moves or speaks, though occasional shouts can be heard from outside. Three teenage girls are sitting bent over their books, while an elderly spinster sits facing them, intent on her work. (Delamont, 1976, p. 9)

These two statements are separated by almost sixty years and the locations are thousands of miles apart. The first scenario is a tropical beach on the Trobriand Islands, off the eastern tip of New Guinea, while the second situation is a girls' public school in Scotland. Both scenes are 'fields'; that is circumscribed areas of study which have been the subject of social research. In both cases, the style of research that has been used relies

on an observational approach involving a relationship between the researcher and those who are researched. This type of research has been principally conducted by social anthropologists and sociologists and is known as *fieldwork, ethnography, case study, qualitative research, interpretative procedures* and *field research.* Each of these terms results in this kind of research being conceptualised slightly differently as a different emphasis is given to the work which is done by particular people. Among social anthropologists *fieldwork* is synonymous with the collection of data using observational methods. However, for sociologists the term is also used to refer to the collection of data using a social survey (cf. Srinivas, 1966, p. 156; Moser and Kalton, 1971). *Ethnography* has been defined by Conklin (1968) as the data of cultural anthropology that are derived from the direct observation of behaviour in a particular society. The making, reporting and evaluation of these observations is the task of ethnographers. For he adds that if these tasks are to be successful they should be related to interpretations derived from social and cultural anthropology. However, Wolcott (1975, 1982) has argued that there has been much confusion around the term 'ethnography' as it has become equated with the techniques of doing research. Instead, he argues that it is the cultural perspective not the research technique that distinguishes ethnography from other work. Nevertheless, many British researchers, especially those engaged in the study of schools and classrooms, have used the term 'ethnography' to describe their style of work (cf. Woods, 1977; Hammersley, 1980; 1982). However, Stenhouse (1984) has argued against using this term as he considers ethnographers to be aggressive to their subjects through a link that he perceives between ethnography and colonialism (cf. Asad, 1973). Furthermore, for Stenhouse, ethnographers are strangers to the situations they research, a position, he argues, which cannot be adopted by most researchers who study schools and classrooms. Accordingly, he refers to his own research as *case study* based on condensed field experience involving observation (rather than the classic participant observer strategy), tape-recorded interviews and the collection of documents (cf. Stenhouse, 1982).

A similar range of methods is encompassed by the term *qualitative research* but with a different emphasis. This term has been used by sociologists such as Filstead (1970), Bogdan and Taylor (1975) and Bogdan and Biklen (1982) to refer to a series of research strategies: participant observation, and in-depth, unstructured or semi-structured interviews. Here again the focus is upon research strategies that allow the researcher to learn about the social world at first hand. Qualitative methods, it is argued, allow researchers 'to get close to the data' and provide opportunities for them to derive their concepts from the data that are gathered (cf. Glaser and Strauss, 1967). While this term has the virtue of highlighting particular dimensions of the research process it often does so at the expense of other methods. Filstead (1970), for example, has remarked:

> The assets of qualitative methodology in sociology need to be stressed and the shortcomings of quantitative methodology need to be exposed in their boldest relief. (Filstead, 1970, p. 8)

The result, as Halfpenny (1979) has clearly shown, is some polarity between qualitative and quantitative methods where the former is considered to be soft, subjective and speculative, while the latter is described as hard, objective and rigorous. Yet in reality

researchers have shown how these approaches may complement each other (Zelditch, 1962) and may be integrated in the practice of social research (Sieber, 1973).

Many sociologists utilise participant observation, in-depth or unstructured interviews and documentary evidence in the course of their research in order to elucidate the meaning of social situations. Essentially their focus of interest is the way in which different people experience, interpret and structure their lives. Accordingly, the methods of investigation that are used have been developed in relation to those theoretical perspectives or theoretical orientations that are concerned with the way in which the social world is structured by the participants. Bogdan and Biklen (1982) indicate that much research of this kind involves a phenomenological perspective whereby researchers attempt to understand the meaning of events for people in particular situations. The focus is upon the way in which participants interpret their experience and construct reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). The ultimate aim is to study situations from the participants' point of view. Williams (1981) has shown how these methods that are often termed *interpretative procedures* owe much to the theoretical tradition known loosely as 'interactionism' which is represented in the work of sociologists such as Becker (1963, 1970a), Blumer (1969) and Hughes (1971). For it is this theoretical perspective that has been the major influence on field research in sociology. The perspective adopted by symbolic interactionists is clearly articulated in the papers edited by Rose (1962) and Manis and Meltzer (1967). Basically, interactionists provide an interpretative view of sociology which puts emphasis on understanding the actions of participants on the basis of their active experience of the world and the ways in which their actions arise from and reflect back on experience (cf. Williams, 1981).

This emphasis upon meanings that individuals construct and modify during the process of interaction holds implications for the research process. For as Blumer remarks, the study of action has to be conducted from the position of the actor in order to see the way in which actors perceive situations.

> In short, one would have to take the role of the actor and see his world from his standpoint. This methodological approach stands in contrast to the so-called objective approach so dominant today, namely that of viewing the actor and his action from the perspective of an outside, detached observer…the actor acts toward his world on the basis of how he sees it and not on the basis of how that world appears to the outside observer. (Blumer, 1966, p. 542)

Using this theoretical perspective it therefore becomes essential to gather statements made by participants with a view to examining the various dimensions of the situation that they construct. It is also important to focus upon ongoing patterns of interaction.

While this approach to sociological research is rooted in the symbolic interactionist tradition, it does overlook other theoretical positions that have been used to orientate field research. For example, classic anthropological studies by Malinowski (1929, 1935a) utilised a structural functionalist perspective, while more recently field researchers in social anthropology (cf. Middleton, 1978) and in sociology (cf. Sharp and Green, 1975; Sharp, 1981) have demonstrated how Marxism can influence the collection and analysis of field data. Nevertheless, no matter which of these approaches are used they are not

simply neat-fitting theoretical models that can be imposed on field situations and on data. Instead, they provide an orientation to field research that can be moulded and remoulded by the researcher in the course of collecting and analysing data.

The terminology that is, therefore, used to discuss our mode of research is very broad. Some of these terms have much in common and cover a broadly similar approach, while others lead towards restrictive usage and a particular emphasis. In an introductory text of this nature the aim is to provide a broad survey of the area of study in order to display the widest range of conceptual and methodological tools that can be used by the researcher while conducting investigations in the empirical world. Accordingly, the term *field research* will be used within this book to include material that is drawn from anthropology and sociology, to incorporate different theoretical perspectives and to explore the relationships between a variety of different methods. It covers what is colloquially known as participant observation, unstructured interviews and documentary methods; although depending on the problem at hand other approaches can be used. As in Burgess (1982a) this term will be used to draw together a wide range of ideas and materials that can be utilised by the researcher while doing research. In this sense, my view of the field researcher is close to the position adopted by Schatzman and Strauss who maintain that:

> The field researcher is a methodological pragmatist. He sees any method of inquiry as a system of strategies and operations designed -at any time— for getting answers to certain questions about events which interest him. (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973, p. 7)

The researcher is, therefore, engaged in a variety of tasks. A central feature of this work involves monitoring the research process and the research design. For the design will be continually modified and developed by the researcher throughout the project. Alongside observational work, formal and informal interviews may be conducted and life histories and personal documents may be collected. In addition, techniques will need to be developed for gathering, storing, retrieving and analysing data as well as checking the reliability and validity of that data. However, basic to the conduct of field research is the development of relationships between the researcher and those who are researched. Field researchers have, therefore, to take roles, handle relationships, and enter into the commerce and conflict of everyday life. The daily routine of field research is captured by Gravel when he remarks:

> The substantive part of field work has no glamour. It is made up of routine matters about which it is difficult to be expansive. Fieldwork is really made up of the same little administrative tasks we try to get away from. It is made up of trying to make ends meet. It is made up of wiping dishes, of sweeping floors, of book-keeping, of keeping things and equipment in shape, of filing away notes, letters and photographs or writing endlessly and eternally trying to remember more. It is made up of attempts at disentangling the red tape of local bureaucracies and at reviving moribund requests and permissions. It is made up of constantly trying to reschedule timeless time and to fathom bottomless pits. It is made up of supervision

of assistants, of correcting errors, covering faux-pas, and of re-instilling a
sense of purpose in your crew. It is made up of the tedium of daily life
with suddenly no one to share it with. (Gravel, 1976, p. 121)

While this account comes from an anthropologist commenting on the study of another
culture, it is equally applicable to researchers who study their own society. As a
consequence, field research cannot be neatly fitted into a linear model of steps or stages,
for the field researcher has to cope with a variety of social situations, perspectives and
problems. Doing field research is, therefore, not merely the use of a set of uniform
techniques but depends on a complex interaction between the research problem, the
researcher and those who are researched. It is on this basis that the researcher is an active
decision-maker who decides on the most appropriate conceptual and methodological
tools that can be used to collect and analyse data. Field research is concerned with
research processes as well as research methods. Field research methodologists have
therefore focused on issues involved in starting research, gaining access, selecting
informants, and handling ethical problems as well as collecting, analysing and reporting
data (cf. Bogdan, 1972; Lofland, 1971; Wax, 1971; Schatzman and Strauss, 1973;
Bogdan and Taylor, 1975; Johnson, 1975; Agar, 1981; Bogdan and Biklen, 1982;
Burgess, 1982a, 1982b). Some of these issues will be discussed in this book drawing on
examples from studies conducted in urban industrial society.

The Organisation of the Book

This book has three specific aims. First, to provide a link between the abstract principles
of research and the *actual* practice of doing field research. Secondly, to provide a
commentary on issues involved in contemporary field research practice; and finally to
provide an account of how some field problems have been resolved by researchers in
particular settings. Taking note of Becker's injunction that 'methodology is too important
to be left to methodologists' (Becker, 1970b, p. 3) the focus will be upon the problems
that confront the researcher in the field. Accordingly, methodological problems will be
discussed in relation to empirical studies that have been conducted by sociologists and
social anthropologists especially in Britain and the USA. In particular, examples will be
drawn from substantive areas such as education, work, deviancy and health and illness,
for field research and field researchers have now come home from Pacific islands and
Indian reservations to study people who live and work within a few miles of the
university and research institute. It is this theme that is focused upon in the first chapter.

  In *Chapter 1* we examine the traditional approach to field research within
anthropology, its translation to similar fields of study within sociology, and the problems
which sociologists have encountered in studying their own culture. These problems are
centrally placed in the opening chapter as examples of work that has been done within the
researcher's own society are used in subsequent chapters. *Chapter 2* looks at the
problems involved in starting research: preparations for the field including a discussion of
grants and sponsorship and the gaining of research access. *Chapter 3* turns to problems of
selection and sampling including the use of key informants, while *Chapter 4* explores the
relationship between researcher and researched drawing on the range of relationships that

researchers have participated in and the implications that their roles have for the collection and analysis of data.

It is to the relationship between data collection and data analysis that we also turn in the subsequent two chapters. *Chapter 5* focuses on unstructured interviews while *Chapter 6* looks at the ways in which field researchers can use documentary evidence. In *Chapter 7* the focus is upon the use of different research strategies alongside one another. Here, special emphasis is given to the range of methods that are employed by field researchers, the ways they have been used and in particular the potential for integrating different kinds of methods within field projects. Meanwhile, *Chapter 8* turns to questions concerning the recording and analysis of data and to the relationships between theorising and field research. All of these processes are considered central to work that is conducted in the field. Finally, *Chapter 9* brings us back to looking at the whole of the research process by focusing upon the ethical and political problems that all researchers encounter to a greater or lesser degree. A brief concluding chapter discusses some of the criteria that can be used to evaluate field studies.

The emphasis of this book is, therefore, upon the processes and problems involved in the conduct of field research. It does not seek to codify procedure nor does it imply that 'all it needs is (occasionally a suitable disguise, but always) just a notebook, a pencil, and a lot of stamina and free time' (Ditton and Williams, 1981, p. 46). While it is not denied that these are essential tools and resources of the field researcher, they are no substitute for research skill, creativity, imagination, and theoretical flair. Together they constitute the experience of the field researcher whose analysis of methodological issues will deepen our understanding of the ways in which research problems can be handled.

Research Experience: Sources and Resources

There are now many examples of field research experience in the literature from social anthropologists (cf. Golde, 1970; Spindler, 1970) and from sociologists (cf. Hammond, 1964; Shipman, 1976; Bell and Newby, 1977; Shaffir, Stebbins and Turowetz, 1980; Roberts, 1981; Burgess, 1984a). In addition many empirical studies, especially in the area of deviancy, have utilised field research methods (cf. Humphreys, 1970; Young, 1971; Plant, 1975) so much so that many examples from the study of deviancy are used and quoted by field researchers (cf. Douglas, 1976; Rock, 1979, pp.. 178–216). However, there are also many British studies where field research methods have been used to examine everyday settings in industrial society: hospitals (Atkinson, 1981), factories (Cavendish, 1982; Pollert, 1981), schools (Ball, 1981; Burgess, 1983) and localities (Cohen, A.P., 1982). Accordingly, this book will focus on examples of field experience that have been drawn from a range of British and American studies.

The study which I will use in all the chapters to illustrate some of the problems and processes involved in doing field research will be my own research in a purpose-built co-educational Roman Catholic comprehensive school which I called Bishop McGregor (Burgess, 1983). This school had a House system for pastoral care and a departmental system for academic, non-academic and practical subjects. These Houses and departments were located in separate blocks that were situated on a 34-acre site.

In this study I was concerned with the way in which a comprehensive school worked in practice; how the House system was used by teachers and pupils and how pupils who were regarded as the 'less willing' and 'less able' fared within a comprehensive school. Such a focus involved looking at the way in which situations were defined and redefined and as Stebbins (1967) has indicated, required the observation of events, situations and groups. Detailed observations needed to be made if I was to acquire the definitions and meanings that were attributed to social situations in the school.

To conduct this study I established myself as a permanent part-time teacher in the school's Newsom Department, a department that provided courses for pupils for whom the maximum expectation of success in public examinations seemed likely to be three Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) grade fives or less. I took this role as it allowed me to become a member of the school, of a House and of a department, all of which were bases from which I could conduct research. Secondly, it allowed me to utilise my previous professional experience as a secondary school teacher and finally, it gave me sufficient time to observe situations, conduct interviews, collect documents and write field notes (cf. Lacey, 1976). The study of this school is available in Burgess (1983) and examines from an interactionist perspective the ways in which teachers, pupils and teachers and pupils defined and redefined the rules and routines in the everyday life of the school. All the names of people, situations and events used in this book and elsewhere have been disguised by means of pseudonyms in order to offer some anonymity to those who generously gave of their time. The material that is taken from this study is used to consider major issues in the conduct of research that occurs in the field.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Methodology

The following references refer to the different styles of field research that have been briefly discussed in this introduction.

Agar, M. (1981), *The Professional Stranger An Informal Introduction to Ethnography* (New York: Academic Press); gives an anthropological perspective on the conduct of field research.

Burgess, R.G. (1982) (ed.), *Field Research: a Sourcebook and Field Manual* (London: Allen & Unwin). A companion volume to this book which reviews the main issues and problems in field research. It includes writings from experienced field researchers in sociology and social anthropology and a discussion of the use of historical sources in field research.

Conklin, H.C. (1968), 'Ethnography' in D.L.Sills (ed.), *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan and The Free Press); provides a brief discussion of the meaning of the term 'ethnography' and its current usage.

Filstead, W.J. (1970) (ed.), *Qualitative Methodology: Firsthand Involvement with the Social World* (New York: Markham). A collection of papers that are principally American. The introduction includes a discussion by the editor of the term 'qualitative methodology'.

Rock, P. (1979), *The Making of Symbolic Interactionism* (London: Macmillan). A useful review of the main literature on interactionism. Chapter 6 examines the relationship between symbolic interactionism and participant observation

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