

# Four Varieties of Qualitative Notes

Adapted by Donald Ratcliff from

Corsaro (1981). Entering the child's world. In J. Green & C. Wallat (Eds), *Ethnography and Language in Educational Settings* (pp. 117-147). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

(Corsaro adapted his outline from A. Strauss)

- **Field Notes**--A running account of what happens or transcriptions of video or audio tapes. It is important to be thorough in taking field notes, particularly at the earliest phases of research; as much as possible, try to get the whole picture of what is happening.
- **Personal Notes**--Personal reactions, how you feel, self-reflection, memories, and impressions. A bit like a diary, so you can later see your own possible influences on the data and the effects of personal events to the data collection and analysis.
- **Methodology Notes**--Description of methods used, reasons for using those methods, ideas for possible changes in methodology. This is used for keeping track of changes and rational for changes. Include possible and actual adaptations of methods. Can include methods of analysis.
- **Theoretical Notes**--Emergent trends, hypotheses. Also can include guesses and hunches to follow up later in your research. Describe changes made to emergent categories and hypotheses, and the reasons why those changes were made.

These four kinds of notes will overlap from time to time. In my own research, I found myself blending personal notes with the other varieties, and thus did not use personal notes for awhile. Later in the research I found I needed a separate category again so I began keeping personal notes again.

These notes can be made by hand with pad and pens, but some have found it beneficial to use other media such as small laptop computers, talking quietly into a cassette tape recorder, or using the audio track of a videocamera. The disadvantage of these other methods is the distraction to participants. Some researchers take periodic breaks to go to a separate area and write or type notes--one even used the restroom for this purpose!

When typing notes into the computer--either at the scene or when transcribing later--it is good to leave a blank column on one side of the paper for hand-written codes and comments. If you are right handed, leave the right column blank (and vice versa); that way you won't smear the printing with your hand. I found it helpful to use separate files for each day, and separate files for each kind of notes. I also backed up my notes onto a floppy disk every day.

Some qualitative research computer programs allow you to add your notes directly to the program, then add coding and analysis later--thus leaving the column blank is unnecessary. I prefer standard word processing programs to qualitative research programs

because they are quite flexible and relatively easy to learn (most of us already know a couple or two word processors). But qualitative research programs have their own advantages.

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