6

Observations, Fieldwork, and Other Data Collection

Introduction

This chapter describes approaches for conducting observations and fieldwork, along with other data collection methods that might be used within a CBQR study. This chapter also includes student reflections on the challenges entailed when conducting fieldwork, as well as examples of different sorts of visual and/or electronic documents and artifacts that can serve as a source of data within CBQR.

Learning Goals

After reading this chapter, students will be able to:

1. Describe different types of participant observation, and determine when certain participant observation approaches are most appropriate within community-based qualitative research (CBQR) studies.

2. Discuss some of the issues and challenges entailed when conducting field work.

3. Identify different types of textual and visual data and artifacts that might be used within CBQR, and describe how they can be used to support other forms of data.

4. Explain how websites and social media posts might be used as a source of data within CBQR studies.

Observations and Fieldwork

Conducting observations and engaging in fieldwork are important components of data collection in community-based qualitative research (CBQR) projects. Early on in a study, they can help researchers become acclimated to the community, familiarize them with community events, and help them build rapport with community members. Throughout the study, fieldwork provides insights on community life and practices and helps researchers tap into and better understand interactions among participants.

Types and Levels of Participant Observation

Participant observation is a central data collection approach within anthropology and other fields such as sociology, psychology, and education; it involves either formal or informal observations of settings, activities, and/or events, such as classrooms/classes, meetings, performances, tutoring sessions, workshops, protests and demonstrations, daily rituals, and workplaces. The goal of these observations is to learn "the explicit and tacit aspects" of the life routines and culture of a particular group (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. 1). Formal observations are usually set up in advance and are often of nonpublic activities, such as classes, meetings, and workshops, whereas informal observations might be more impromptu.

Within these observations, researchers can adopt various roles in relation to settings and participants. James Spradley (1980) outlines different levels of participation that might occur within participation observation, from passive to complete. A *passive* participant would maintain no membership within the setting, serving as a bystander and not interacting with participants. In CBQR studies, these sorts of

observations might include initial observations of relevant community settings—such as parks, playgrounds, and central business districts—or events such as community parades and festivals. *Moderate* participation would entail that the researcher maintains a balance between being an insider and outsider within the setting and adopts a more peripheral role. The researcher might observe a classroom or workshop from the corner and occasionally interact with participants, but for the most part he or she remains on the sidelines.

Researchers might also take on *active* membership as a participant observer, where they seek "to *do* what other people are doing . . . to more fully learn the cultural rules for behavior" (Spradley, 1980, p. 60). An active role requires that researchers fully participate in setting activities. For example, a student enrolled in a summer community-based research course I instructed conducted fieldwork at a community café to understand better how employees learn at this workplace and the role of the café in community life. Instead of observing from the outside, as in passive or peripheral membership, the student donned an apron and worked the front counter of the café. This role allowed her to gain greater insight into the processes of knowledge and skill acquisition and the routines at the café than if she had been sitting in the corner observing passively.

Complete or full membership is a role assumed by individuals who are already participants in a setting. This would be appropriate for research partners conducting research in settings and contexts within which they actively participate and are thus familiar. Some researchers caution that it is more difficult to notice tacit rules and taken-for-granted routines when one is a member of the setting. However, the insight that a complete member can provide is often invaluable to a project; in CBQR studies, such insider knowledge and experiences are essential to better understanding community issues, beliefs, and practices.

Within one research study, researchers can take on multiple roles and levels of membership as participant observers. For example, researchers investigating a community agriculture initiative might assume a moderate role for observations of planning meetings, taking notes and asking questions when appropriate; during a planting event for a community garden, it would be more appropriate for researchers to participate alongside program staff and community residents in the activity, taking on an active role.

Within CBQR, the concept of *observant* participation might be more meaningful than participant observation. Although participant observation occurs along a continuum, the term emphasizes observation rather than the active participation in community settings that is the hallmark of most CBQR studies. In some cases, a more peripheral role might be appropriate. But, in many other instances, taking on the role of bystander might actually hinder a researcher's ability to learn about a particular setting. For example, Kathy, who conducted fieldwork at a community bike shop as part of a summer research course, initially attempted to collect data standing in the corner with a notepad. She shared that she felt awkward and out of place and that participants at the site seemed to view her as an intrusion—in fact, one bike shop member teased her by asking who she was an informant for. After what she viewed as a fieldwork disaster, she returned to the site, brought her bike, and participated in a

fix-it workshop, finding this to be a more natural and effective approach for learning about the processes of knowledge acquisition and transmission at the shop.

Kathy's experience illustrates the need for researchers conducting CBQR to make decisions regarding the level of participation in observations based on what makes sense and is appropriate in particular contexts, as well as keeping in mind the purpose of the observation. Community-based qualitative researchers usually take a more active role in observations and include complete members as part of the research team, but there may be occasions when a more passive or moderate role is warranted within observations. The following section discusses issues related to conducting observations.

Conducting Participant Observation

Although observations within CBQR studies can emerge informally, there is often planning required for conducting observations. First and foremost, as detailed in Chapter 4, researchers should decide at the outset of the study what sorts of events and activities will be helpful to providing information and insight related to the project's research questions. It is also important to determine the type of role that researchers will play in observations before conducting observations. For example, researchers should agree to their level of participation in each observation and discuss this role, along with the purpose of observations, with key stakeholders and/or gatekeepers beforehand as this can help the research team avoid confusion and misunderstandings. For example, if a researcher plans on adopting a moderate role within an observation of a science class where an urban agriculture project is being introduced, this should be clearly articulated and agreed to beforehand with the teacher. Otherwise, the teacher might view the researcher as potential "extra help" within the classroom or involve the researcher in the classroom as an active member. Conversely, the researcher might want to take on an active role within a particular setting but then is excluded and treated as a passive observer by participants because the role was not negotiated at the outset. Furthermore, researchers should inquire about any rules that apply to the setting—such as dress codes or cell phone use—to prevent violating any of these. Especially in situations where adults might be in positions of authority over youth or children, the role of researchers within the setting should be mutually agreed to beforehand.

As illustrated in Kathy's "sticking out" in her observation of a bike shop, regardless of the level of participation chosen for an observation, researchers should attempt to "blend in" as much as possible. This acclimatization can be achieved through appropriate clothing/dress, stances, and/or materials. Researchers should dress in ways that are suitable given their role and the setting. For example, if researchers are actively participating in a community cleanup, formal attire, such as a suit, would not be appropriate; however, if they are serving as passive observers of a school board meeting, they might want to dress more professionally. Researchers can also blend in as far as stances and orientation. Particularly in the beginning of a project or when tackling a controversial or divisive topic, researchers might want to keep their viewpoints

and stances somewhat neutral as expressing strong opinions within the observations might silence divergent voices or bias participants' perspectives.

Researchers should also plan for how they will document information from observations. Many fieldworkers take field notes (and these are discussed in more detail in the following section) to detail descriptions of setting and record interactions, dialogue, and behaviors, although in some instances, this sort of "in the field" note taking can be viewed as intrusive. An alternative option is to take notes immediately after the observation, but the level of detail will be compromised. Sometimes audio and video recording is used to facilitate this documentation, but this can also be an invasive element, and it poses additional risks to confidentiality, which can make institutional review board (IRB) approval more cumbersome.

The role of the researcher within observations should be evaluated and negotiated throughout the project by members of the research team, as well as through ongoing discussions and dialogue with research partners and participants. As much as possible, researchers should make attempts to reciprocate participants for the opportunity to observe them.

Field Notes

There are two primary types of field notes: descriptive and reflective. **Descriptive field notes** provide in-depth descriptions and depictions of particular settings and events, as well as the participants, objects, activities, behaviors and interactions that make up these contexts. **Reflective field notes** contain reflective commentary and are often focused on the role or stances of the researcher in relation to the setting and participants, providing the opportunity for researchers to "step back" from the setting and explore moments of discomfort or discontinuity, reflect on ethical dilemmas, discuss methodological challenges and obstacles, detail revelations and epiphanies, and/or examine researchers' experiences and beliefs in relation to research participants. This section will be focused on descriptive field notes as these are the type of notes most often used as a part of a data set, although reflective field notes can serve as important data to offer insight into the research process and researchers' changing stances and beliefs. (See Figure 6.1 for a summary of information in descriptive and reflective field notes.)

As mentioned, it is important to establish a method of documenting information and insights gained within observations. Many fieldworkers take **jotted field notes**, traditionally in a notebook but more increasingly by using laptops and other technology such as tablets and phones. When it is not possible to take notes *in situ*, researchers might make notations immediately after the observation, while information is still fresh. Audio and video devices can also be employed to support researchers' memories during an observation (and the following section provides more explanation of how to use audio and video recording to prepare transcripts of observations). Many researchers insist that field notes be written "contemporaneously" as perspectives change over time and because of the importance of "preserving experience close to the moment of occurrence" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011, p. 17). After the observation, these jotted

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FIGURE 6.1 ● Information in Descriptive and Reflective Field Notes

Descriptive Field Notes

- Descriptions of participants: Physical characteristics, clothing and accessories, gestures and facial expressions, role within setting or activity

- Description of setting/context: Physical context, organization and layout of the setting, decorations, signage, materials, and specific items

- Discussion and dialogue: Members' terms, dialogue, descriptions, stories, definitions, forms of address and greetings, and everyday questions and routines; capture direct quotations when possible

- Accounts of behavior and activities: Roles and behavior, reactions and responses; avoid abstract words of actions

- Observer's behavior: Researcher's physical location in the setting, behavior, and interactions with participants

Reflective Field Notes

- Reflective commentary

- Role or stances of the researcher in relation to the setting and participants

- Moments of discomfort or discontinuity

- Ethical dilemmas

- Methodological challenges and obstacles

- Revelations and epiphanies

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notes should be written into **formalized field notes** to create a fuller and more detailed rendering of activities and events and to produce a more seamless narrative than is possible with jotted notes, although field notes can never serve as an omniscient version of what has occurred. Most researchers strongly urge that these formal field notes be written immediately after the observation; Annette Lareau (1989/1997) recommends strict adherence to her 24-hour rule for completing field notes. Otherwise, one cannot trust the accuracy of the information included in the notes and they may not include the same level of detail. If it is not possible to write up formal field notes within a day, researchers might consider dictating field notes to create "talk notes," although eventually these will need to be transcribed if they are to be used for analysis (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 49).

When conducting CBQR studies, researchers should always carry a notebook with them even if they have not scheduled ans observation. This will enable them to take advantage of impromptu opportunities for participant observation and to record notations of spontaneous events and displays. For example, members of the research team might be out for lunch and come upon an activity relevant to their research topic, or they may observe an interaction that provides insight into their topic. Students

enrolled in summer classes I have instructed on CBQR have taken note of organized groups exercising in the park and newly added healthy offerings in local restaurants as evidence of the role that a community health initiative was playing across community settings. Students attending a community parade included not only rich detail of parade floats but also accounts of what took place before the parade, such as descriptions of community residents dancing on the sidewalk, and noted comments made to them and questions asked by passersby. One student even recorded in her field notes a discussion she had with the taxi driver who drove her to the area.

In writing field notes, researchers should attempt to identify and describe indigenous and local meanings and develop "an understanding of what [participants] . . . experiences and activities *mean to them*" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 16). Field notes should include detailed descriptions of the setting, as well as of participants. Field notes from initial observations of a site might also feature maps and drawings of site/setting or classroom layout. These descriptions should be as fine-grained as possible, including vivid details that will evoke visual images. When describing people, include descriptions of features and characteristics such as hair and skin color, body type, attire, jewelry and accessories, and tattoos. In the early stages of the project, researchers should create such character sketches to provide them with a sense of key actors and participants in particular settings; as they become more familiar with individuals within the research context, they may not need to include these detailed physical descriptions in every field note entry. Researchers should also take in the physical context, noting details about the organization and layout of the setting, as well as decorations, signage, materials, and items. It is important to "map the scene" not only to capture these details but also to examine spatial arrangements and gather data on social relationships (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Within CBQR, in addition to descriptions of specific sites, researchers might provide descriptions of the broader community. This community mapping can be used as a "means of defining the study area, understanding and analyzing the geographical description of community members, [and] describing the activity spaces" (DeWalt, & DeWalt, 2011, p. 84).

Alongside these depictions of the physical elements of the setting and community, field notes should include accounts of social and interaction processes. As researchers observe interactions and dialogue among participants in the setting, they should take specific note of details that contextualize talk, as well as of members' terms, descriptions, stories, definitions, forms of address and greetings, and everyday questions and routines. The sorts of language and terms that participants use can provide researchers with insights into how various individuals in the setting view the topic and their stances related to community issues and events. The ways that individuals interact with one another within the setting can indicate relationships among participants; researchers should be especially sensitive to participants' roles and power hierarchies within particular activities and contexts. In pursuing members' meanings, researchers should pay attention to the ways in which members' react to specific events and behaviors, as well as to how they "invoke relevant contexts for particular activities and relevant contrasts for some feature or quality of their setting" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 144). In addition, documenting "members' complex explanations for when, why,

and how particular things happen," or their theories of causes, can help researchers better understand participants' beliefs and processes of meaning making (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 149). Whenever you can, quote people verbatim rather than summarizing what they say, although it is not always possible to collect extended direct quotes; thus, field notes should include direct quotations interspersed with approximations and summaries.

When writing up descriptive field notes, researchers should avoid the use of any judgmental or evaluative language, such as "good" or "bad" as a way of describing a behavior or person. Remember that the purpose of participant observation is not to judge or evaluate the behavior and actions of participants but to learn more about experiences, beliefs, and practices. Using adjectives or phrases that label, generalize, or stereotype participants results in vague and objectifying (and often inaccurate) descriptions that pose challenges to analyzing data later in the project. For example, two students enrolled in a summer CBQR course interested in health initiatives within a Puerto Rican community were assigned to walk around in the community and individually take field notes on resources related to health in the community; in a corner store, one woman described the cashier as "African American" and another as "Puerto Rican," and both were incorrect (I knew that the man was from Palestine). Both women had made assumptions about the man's ethnic identity based on his skin color and the community context that provided few specifics about what he looked like and what he did. Instead, they might have written concrete descriptions of his features, what he was wearing, what he said, and what sorts of objects, such as photos and artifacts, occupied his work area, details that would have been much more enlightening regarding the man's identity. Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw (2011) urge fieldworkers to steer clear of simplistic physical attributes and "common indicators of general social categories"—such as age, gender, and race—and instead "capture distinctive qualities" and create a "*vivid* image" that "depicts specific details about people and settings so that the image can be clearly visualized" (p. 60).

Abstract words, such as *teaching*, *disciplining*, and *leading*, are also not helpful in describing participants' actions and behavior; instead researchers should write detailed accounts of what people are doing and saying. Furthermore, community-based qualitative researchers should focus on what they see and observe, rather than on what's "not there," or what does not happen, as noting what is absent contains an implicit value judgment and assumptions regarding what resources and practices researchers think *should* exist within the setting. Within descriptive field notes, researchers must resist the urge to analyze or interpret behavior, although many would point out that engaging in participant observation and constructing field notes is always an interpretive act as researchers make decisions about what to notice that are always filtered through the particular lens of the researcher. That said, explicit analysis and interpretation should be kept at a minimum and only included as part of an aside or observer's comments. These **observer's comments** can be indicated with bracketed text, such as [OC:] (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Researchers could also include some reflective commentary at the end of their notes.

Although the primary focus of descriptive field notes is on the participants and setting, researchers should also include themselves as a character. This could include descriptions of the researcher's physical location in the setting, behavior, and interactions with participants. For example, researchers should describe their role within the setting and how participants respond and react to them, such as questions they ask or comments they make. It is also important to keep notes organized and establish a consistent system of record keeping for field notes, such as including dates, time periods, and setting in header, and titling each field note with a numbering system (for example, Field01, Field02, etc.).

Videotaped Observations

Some researchers within CBQR studies might also videotape observations to provide a source of data. For research projects interested in capturing interactions and dialogue in a fine-grained way, recording and completing a verbatim transcription is essential. Videotaped observations can, of course, offer much more detail than is possible in observations that rely on memory and handwritten notes; however, a drawback is that recordings need to be transcribed, which is extremely time-consuming. When this level of detail is not required, video recordings could be used to supplement and support the completion of field notes; in this case, researchers might use recordings to "jog" memory or fill in gaps within notes rather than to complete verbatim transcriptions. Or, researchers could review video recordings and select critical incidents that closely relate to topic or phenomenon and transcribe those more fully, although it can still be a chore to review recordings. Furthermore, it should be noted that video recordings also pose additional challenges in terms of storage and usually require dedicated and ample server space. Gathering data via audio and video recordings also makes IRB approval more cumbersome.

Although one might view video recordings as purveying an omniscient view of a particular setting, there are limitations. Unless researchers have multiple cameras and research team members who can manage the cameras, the video can only offer a "slice" of activity in any particular setting, depending on where the camera is situated and what persons and activities the lens is taking in. Thus, researchers should not rely solely on the video recording and take notes if they can. Furthermore, in some cases, the presence of video cameras can be perceived intrusively and might make participants uncomfortable and reticent to participate authentically in the setting.

Documents, Artifacts, and Visual Data

In addition to conducting participant observation and completing field notes, researchers might collect textual documents and visual images to provide insight on their topic and setting. These can be identified and gathered within participant observation or even suggested and provided by participants within focus groups and interviews. Some might be physical documents, such as paper brochures, handouts, and posted

flyers, whereas others might be found electronically, such as websites and blogs. This section discusses the use of this sort of data within CBQR and provide some examples from community-based studies.

Use of Documents, Artifacts, and Visual Data

Documents, artifacts, and visual data might be used in several ways within qualitative research studies. In some cases, documents and artifacts might serve as a primary source of data, for example, when researchers might be analyzing archival documents, such as letters or journals, or when they might be examining photographs and images related to a particular topic. Since community-based qualitative researchers are often interested in community members' experiences and perspectives related to a particular issue, it is rare for visual and textual documents to serve as the *sole* source of data within the study. However, there are many cases when they might serve as *a* primary data source, along with interview transcripts and field notes. For example, researchers could examine youth project assignments and materials, such as handouts, final papers, and presentations, related to a community involvement initiative to identify definitions and views of the community. Researchers might closely analyze program materials used to promote neighborhood health programs to explore the sorts of language and terminology used to describe health issues, as well as the types of services offered.

More often, community-based qualitative researchers use documents, artifacts, and visual data to substantiate findings generated from interviews and observations; in these cases, documents and visual data would not be examined as closely as in the previous examples. Photos from a community activity could be used as supportive evidence of youth involvement in community events. Students' poetry and art could serve as exemplars of youth expression and creativity within an after-school arts program. Documents and artifacts can also be used to furnish background information and context related to the setting and issue under study. For example, organizational websites can offer insight into the mission or vision of an organization; community blogs and web portals can be used initially to assess community concerns related to a particular topic.

Textual Documents

A variety of textual documents might be used within a CBQR study, and the examples discussed here are not meant to be exhaustive. Including documents as a data source can provide significant examples of practices and beliefs described within interviews and observed in various community settings. They can also serve to enliven findings by offering textual demonstrations of how certain beliefs and experiences are enacted and expressed by individuals as well as on an organizational or community level. A primary source of documents is offered through participant produced texts and writings, such as student poetry and creative writing, homework assignments and essays, participants' journals or diaries, and/or notes and lists created for specific purposes. For example, in a study looking at housing

issues within a community, a high-school student's poem about changes in the community illustrated how residents are responding to gentrification. In a project on youth civic engagement, a student essay detailing participation in a community beautification project provided insight into specific ways that youth are involved in their community and how such involvement contributes to their notions of community and views of themselves.

Another source of textual documents can be purveyed by program and classroom handouts and materials, such as curriculum guides and syllabi, program brochures, leaflets promoting events, and teachers' lesson plans (see Figure 6.2). These sorts of documents serve as instantiations of particular beliefs and objectives or demonstrate how certain messages and values are being publically transmitted and disseminated. For example, in a project on youth civic engagement, a teacher's lesson plan for a parenting class for young parents served as an illustration of how advocacy skills were integrated into classroom instruction.

Policy documents and materials, such as state educational standards, policy manuals, and organizational mission statements, can help researchers identify organizational goals

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FIGURE 6.2 ● Sustainable Democracy Drafting Organizational History

Use the research and bullet points from your group members to fill out this sheet. The paragraph must include:

1. What is the organization you are working with, and why did its members approach you with their problem?

2. Describe the history of the organization. When and why was it founded? By whom? Include source (Author, Year).

3. What community need does this organization exist to address? Include source (Author, Year).

4. What is the mission, vision, or major goal of this organization? Include source (Author, Year).

5. What does this organization do? List and describe its major activities? Include source (Author, Year).

6. Who is served by this organization? What is the organization's target audience or population? How does it reach out to them? Include source (Author, Year).

7. What effect has this organization made on the community since it started working on this problem? What successes has it had in meeting its goals? Include source (Author, Year).

8. How does the organization collect data on its outcomes? How does it know if it is successful? How does it measure its results? Include source (Author, Year).

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and objectives, as well as determine broader discourses circulating around participants and setting. In a project interested in social emotional learning at a local alternative school, a researcher examined state guidelines informing the school staff's approach to social emotional learning. A project investigating civic engagement reviewed the school handbook, mission statement, and guiding instructional framework to identify how notions of community activism and social justice were integrated into school policy.

## Photographs, Images, and Visual Documents

Visual images can also serve as an important source of insight within CBQR studies. For example, photographs of classrooms, meeting spaces, and events can provide information on spatial layout and organization of activities. Photographs of signage and posters within settings can suggest significant values and belief systems, as well as indicate broader discourses influencing the setting and participants. These images might also contain text, but the emphasis is on how the text interacts with and supports the visual elements.

Archival photos can also be used within studies to purvey historical context and background, and they might be analyzed to examine past events or activities or to trace changes within the physical setting. For example, in a project investigating gentrification and housing in an urban community, photos of the primary community business district over a 50-year period could provide a visual depiction of the community's economic trajectory and the impact of gentrification on community development and displacement of businesses and residents. Pictures of specific events, such as festivals and parades, can offer insight into the long-term significance and transformation of particular traditions and customs, as well as the import of various issues and concerns within the history of the community.

Advertisements, leaflets, and postcards, either locally produced or part of broader public media campaigns, can also play a role in CBQR studies. Locally produced leaflets or banners can serve as instantiations and expressions of community discourses and beliefs related to particular issues; billboards and advertisements can indicate external messages and rhetoric swirling around context and shaping external and local attitudes related to an issue or population. For example, a project exploring the experiences and civic engagement of young mothers in a community reviewed advertisements and popular media images of teen parents as a way of documenting stereotypes and messages about young parents (see photo on page 116). These images were also used to spur discussion about the mothers' experiences with stigma and discrimination. The mothers then created an alternative ad campaign of posters and public service announcements, which included positive images and messages about the experiences and struggles of young mothers.

Websites, Electronic Artifacts, and Social Media

As the Internet, digital resources, and social media become more prevalent ways of acquiring and sharing information, they also become important sources of data
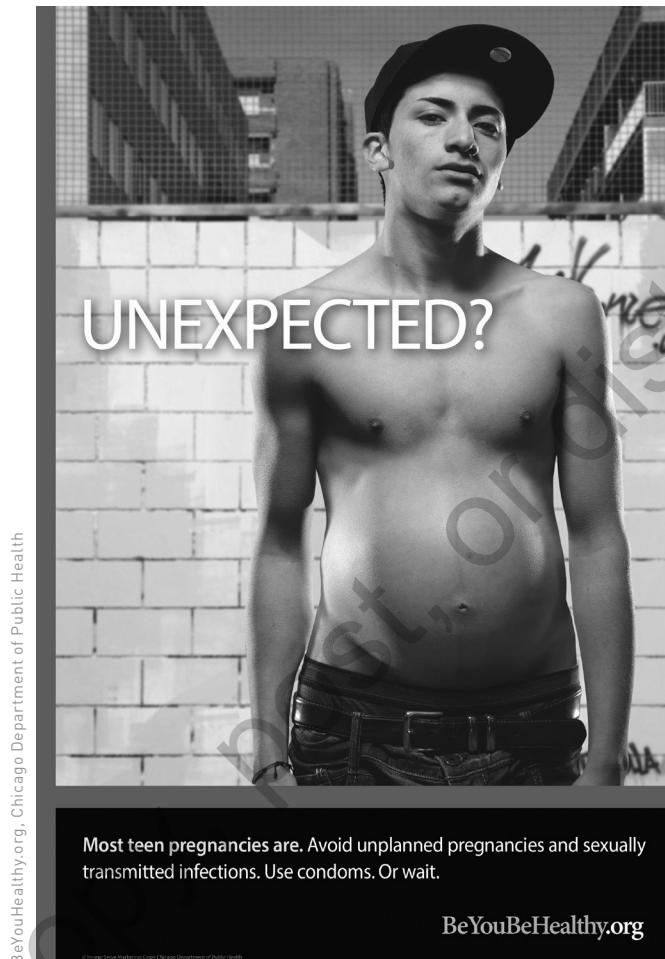
Teen pregnancy advertisement.

within CBQR studies. Organizational websites often include a wealth of information about programs, services, and resources, alongside news related to community issues and events. The website for a community alternative high school featured information on a community urban agriculture initiative that was useful evidence for researchers examining youth civic engagement. Community portals and blogs can help researchers tap into various and divergent attitudes related to community issues and concerns. For example, in a study on housing and gentrification, a community discussion board revealed conflicts and tensions between the long-time, predominately low-income Latino/a residents and the mostly White newcomers to the area.

Social media sites, such as Facebook, are an additional source of data within CBQR studies. These virtual communities can serve as windows into community issues and

debates. Within a project investigating an intergenerational mentorship program for young mothers, researchers used the program's Facebook page to keep track of postings by members, which helped them identify salient issues and topics within the community. The number of "shares" and "likes" of particular items can also indicate the resonance of specific issues. Comments on postings can be analyzed to offer insight on attitudes and viewpoints related to certain topics. Memes, which are images crafted, transmitted, and transformed by users within social media, contain cultural symbols and social ideas that can be used to trace the evolution of individuals' responses to current events, trends, and particular cultural phenomena. In a CBQR study, researchers might examine memes related to a relevant topic or event, such as a local election or controversy.

Hashtags and Twitter feeds are increasingly becoming a way of exploring significant issues, themes, and narratives within a variety of forms of research. Hashtags are tags, keywords, terms, and phrases prefaced with the pound sign (#) that are included as part of a posting on Twitter, or tweet, or other social media site or electronic communication; these terms can be searched by using the term that will locate all instances of the particular hashtag. Hashtags serve clerical and semiotic purposes as they index and order information, as well as "mark the significance of an utterance" and "create a particular interpretive frame" (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015, p. 5). Community members might employ hashtags to express viewpoints, reference local issues, and/or participate in broader social movements. For example, young mothers attending an alternative high school used the #noteenshame hashtag within public service announcements and posters that sought to challenge stereotypes of young parents and speak back to stigmatizing advertisements and depictions in the popular media. The use of this hashtag connected their efforts with a national movement comprising parent advocacy and policy organizations and other young parents.

Individuals might identify a particular event with a hashtag or even use the name of the community as a hashtag to tag and situate an incident, image, or event. Researchers might search for hashtags to locate posts and photos related to a specific event, such as a community parade or protest, or to gather general images of and posts related to the community. Hashtags such as #blacklivesmatter and #ferguson—the first initiated in response to the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman in the 2012 killing of Black teen Trayvon Martin in Florida, and the latter created as part of mass protests in 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, after the killing of Michael Brown, a young Black man, by a police officer—have been used to document and connect incidences of police violence against African Americans and tally the deaths of Blacks at the hands of the police (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Although community-based qualitative researchers are often concerned with issues, activities, and events within a particular geographic locality, the examination of relevant hashtags can be important in demonstrating how local issues and concerns are reflective of and responsive to national and global events and movements, as well as how what happens in a community setting can be connected to occurrences and issues in other contexts.

The hashtag's potential to make intertextual connections across settings and instances can also be a limitation in that a hashtag can link "a broad range of tweets"

that may not be related as various users attribute their purposes to a particular term, such as #STL used to refer to traveling to St. Louis to attend a baseball game and as an expression of solidarity with protesters in Ferguson, MO (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015, p. 5). Furthermore, although it is often possible to determine a geographic location of a tweet, other aspects of the context are more difficult to pin down and such posts thus provide a "limited, partial, and filtered" perspective (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015, p. 7). Because it is usually not possible to determine the identity or to follow up with users and participants in various social media spaces, their intent and purposes are difficult to ascertain. Researchers gathering data from social media sites also need to be mindful of the ethical issues and dilemmas entailed in this form of data collection. Although much of the Internet is a public domain, and generally free from processes of informed consent, the line between public and private can be a bit murky. When using posts from those participating in a CBQR study, researchers should make sure they ask for permission to use them for the study and take steps to protect the identities of participants.

Chapter Summary

This chapter examined the use of participant observation and other forms of data collection within CBQR studies. In particular, the chapter discussed how fieldwork can be used within projects to provide insight into the experiences, beliefs, and practices of community members, as well as offer a window into activities and routines of particular settings and contexts. The role of the researchers within observations can range from passive to active, and it often depends on type of activity or setting being observed. Conducting participant observation usually involves completing formalized field notes after observations, which generally focus on description over reflection, although reflective commentary can be included as bracketed commentary. Often, researchers complete reflective field notes—which can provide opportunities for researchers to reflect on ethical dilemmas or discuss intersections between their lives and those of participants—in addition to descriptive field notes more focused on detailed and microscopic description of setting, participants, and activities.

Textual and visual documents and artifacts are another important form of data employed within CBQR studies. These could include works generated by participants, organizational and programmatic materials, and/or archival images and documents. These sorts of documents are often used within studies to support other forms of data and provide further substantiation of key findings. The Internet and social media sites can also serve as a data source within community-based studies. For example, organizational websites offer valuable information about services, resources, and relevant issues; social media postings and hashtags can indicate resonant topics and debates and demonstrate connections between community activities and events and broader social issues and movements.

Key Terms

● Activities for Reflection and Discussion

1) Conduct a field observation at a public event (at least 15 minutes), either alone or with a partner. If you conduct the observation with a partner, make sure that you stand in different spots in the setting. Take notes on the physical aspects and layout of setting, as well as on the characteristics of the participants. Pay attention to interactions and dialogue among participants and be mindful of insider terms. After the observation, share notes with your partner. What were the differences/similarities in what you noticed? What was missing? Review notes for any evaluative or judgmental language. If you conducted the observation alone, write a short reflection on your experience of conducting the observation. What were the challenges? What did you learn? What do you want to know more about?

2) Draft a list of textual or visual documents or artifacts related to a topic for a community-based qualitative research study. How would you obtain these? How would they complement or support other forms of data? What insights would these provide to the project?

3) Review social media sites and news feeds related to a certain issue or event. What various hashtags are used to tag the event or issue? Select a few of the more prominent hashtags, and conduct a search for other posts using that hashtag. What do the posts have in common? How do they diverge? What do you learn about the issue or event from these posts?