­Transcript

Chapter 12: Collecting Qualitative Data

So, a key thing to recognise about qualitative data is that it is complex. It’s complex in terms of depth and length. Collecting it is also something of a skill - and it’s easy to underestimate just how much time and effort is needed to manage that process. You need to listen, see, and talk, often all at the same time. Think about it, a semi-structured interview is around 40 minutes of you asking questions that will allow you to listen to your participants - that’s a lot of asking and much more listening. It’s actually quite an unusual social situation. Ethnographic encounters also often last hours, all of which you will have to condense into a few pages of notes. Neither of these things are easy! So you need to think carefully about:

* What do you need to find out?
* How might you best elicit that material?
* How can you record it (so you can meaningfully analyse it in the future)?

This involves asking the right people the right questions, looking at the right things, and listening appropriately.

Now, let’s say you’ve done that, you’ve stepped into the field and you’ve got your data. One of two things is likely to happen. The first of those is that you feel simply overwhelmed by the amount of material you collect, but actually this is usually a good problem because it means that you have material to work with and that you can refine your focus of interest - and some selection is usually necessary in qualitative research. Now, the second thing that might happen is that your interviews are very short, or you have no idea of what to put in your ethnographic notes. If you have started data collection early, then you have the option of developing your interview schedule, or you can gain better familiarity with the field so you begin to recognise what to look for. Also remember to ask ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions of both your participants and the field. They will enable you generate deeper data - if you ask a question that can be answered in ‘yes’ or ‘no’ form, it probably will be, so plan prompts that will help keep the conversation going.