

DISASTER RESEARCH CENTER  
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY  
COLUMBUS, OHIO 43201

Working Paper # 31

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH INTO ONGOING CIVIL DISORDERS:  
Some Problems and Considerations

by

J. Rick Ponting  
Department of Sociology  
Disaster Research Center  
The Ohio State University

This paper examines some concerns and problems of qualitative analysis as they emerge in the ongoing civil disorder field situation, and suggests methodological techniques which may be employed in attempting to overcome them. The reader will note that a common concern throughout the paper is the problem of bias entering into field research at various stages.

The background for this paper consists of field observational experience by the author in three civil disorder situations. The first was the 1968 riot at the Democratic Party National Convention in Chicago. The second was a student disorder at a large midwestern university around the time of the United States' invasion of Cambodia in May 1970. This second study encompassed violent confrontations with law enforcement officers (including National Guardsmen), as well as peaceful meetings and rallies by students and faculty members over a period of seven days. The third situation involved an enormous crowd at the same university celebrating an athletic victory by means of a street dance. However, under the pervasive influence of alcohol and marijuana and due to a significant number of non-university students in the crowd, severe vandalism and looting broke out, prompting a violent confrontation with the city police. These three situations are not claimed to be representative of all types of civil disorders, but the examples and discussion herein do offer at least a preliminary insight into the generic phenomenon.

#### The Role of the Researcher and Entree

Buford Junker (1960: 36) describes four theoretical social roles for observation, ranging from complete participant to complete observer. Roles

at the former end of the continuum may be rejected for three reasons: first, for the purposes of obtaining insight into as broad a spectrum of behavior (that of students, faculty, and law enforcement officers) as possible, roles at this end of the continuum are too constraining and not necessarily very productive. Secondly, execution of role demands in this capacity (e.g., throwing bricks) obviously raises serious problems of ethics and professional responsibility. Thirdly, exposure to the risk of arrest is great in this role. While this may be desirable from the standpoint of studying behavior in the jails, it precludes further observations at the scene of the ongoing demonstration or disorder.

Thus, for my purposes, the role of complete observer -- or a close approximation to it -- seems to offer the greatest potential at the outset. But personal difficulties in maintaining a given role -- even when it is deemed most valuable for research purposes -- are especially great in the civil disorder situation, due to the frequent presence of ethical or moral considerations, danger, and/or heightened emotions. Three incidents from my own experience illustrate this well. The first occurred when a student demonstrator, unnoticed by police, put a live tear gas cannister inside a vacant parked car. Although I was not emotionally excited, I felt a moral obligation to prevent an innocent party's car from being destroyed by fire. This meant informing the police of the incident in front of the crowd of student demonstrators, thereby risking the total loss of cooperation from the demonstrators and jeopardizing the entire research endeavor. (I was able to inconspicuously notify the police; the car and my relationship with the demonstrators were both saved.) It is also important to note here that the

researcher's actions constituted an interference with the data. That is, if the car had burned it may have had the effect of changing the situation drastically.

The second incident also involved role conflict and interference with the data. In this case the driver of a large unmarked tanker transport truck was brave (or foolish) enough to slowly drive into the midst of the celebrating crowd on the street. Not knowing what the cargo was, the possibility of a dangerous explosion arose in my mind as drunken students, smoking cigarettes, climbed atop the truck and began opening the hatches. Being one of the few sober individuals on the scene, I took the role of emergent leader in attempting to get the students down off the truck and the truck out of the area. Thus, the salience of my role as responsible citizen was greater than that of my role as researcher. Again, had I not become actively involved it is conceivable that the events might have taken a much different course. (As it turned out, the cargo was a noncombustible powder.) This decision as to whether to become involved or not is an extremely important and difficult one when the consequences for self and others of involvement versus noninvolvement are not known for sure in advance.

The third incident was pervaded with danger and extreme anxiety and involved a temporary complete abandonment of any research role. Perceiving (in error, I learned later) that the police were firing into the crowd, my total concern and energies were devoted to running for my life down an alley thereby missing the opportunity for visual observations of the reaction of others to this situation of extreme anxiety. Thus, it is apparent that role taking must be flexible in some situations. In less extreme situations the

decision to modify one's role should be accompanied by careful consideration of the possible consequences for one's research.

Having selected a role for himself, the observer must also be prepared to offer an identity to the demonstrators if he is to mingle with them to obtain substantive, detailed information. He must also contend with identities ascribed to him by the participants (Anderson, 1970 describes a similar problem). For the observer carrying a tape recorder and/or camera, probably the most common ascribed identity is that of a radio or newspaper representative. This mistaken identity can be turned to the researcher's advantage. On several occasions demonstrators came up to me, thinking I was a newsman, and volunteered information (whether I wanted it or not) before I had a chance to correct their mistake. Data so-gathered should be checked for distortion and validity where ulterior motives of the informant are likely. Of course, the identity of a newsman may work to the researcher's disadvantage in attempting to gain the cooperation of informants or respondents. A striking example of this is the police-press relationship during the Chicago disturbance, when newsmen were subjected to harassment and brutal beatings by the police (Walker, 1968: 139, 303-331, A91; Gunther, 1970 discusses related problems). However, under more "normal" riot conditions this role will tend to promote the researcher's safety. This is because the equipment he carries serves to set him apart as someone different. For instance, although the researcher may have permission from the police chief to be in the curfew zone "after hours," the chief's men may not know that. As a result, they may define him as fair game. Seeing him running from a scene they might easily choose to shoot. (Running is sometimes not a wise

activity after curfew has been imposed.) To offset this, equipment can be carried in as conspicuous a manner as possible and whenever a police car passes on the street, the researcher can pretend to be dictating into the microphone of his tape recorder.<sup>1</sup>

Another disadvantage inherent in using the role of the newsman as a source of entree is that the data may thereby be contaminated severely. That is, the participants may act differently if they know they have an audience and if they know their actions may go on permanent record. This effect on their behavior may be depressing or stimulating. An example of blurring the distinction between social and dramatic acting occurred during the Chicago disturbance and was accompanied by demonstrators shouting "The whole world's watching!" However, it is often possible for the researcher (even with equipment) to blend into the crowd of spectators without influencing the activists.

Civil disturbances present special problems of entree with law enforcement officers and other organizational officials. Entree is best attained through the use of concise and highly legitimate credentials presented at a strategic time. And to be particularly stressed here is the importance of looking the role of a researcher (e.g., vis-a-vis equipment and dress). These factors are important due to the fact that officials are very busy and a marked emphasis is placed on security during a disorder. Also, much time and effort can be saved by first seeking entree directly from a high-ranking officer or official, rather than from their subordinates (who will usually refer you upwards anyway). It is also necessary to be cognizant of the division of labor among law enforcement agencies. For instance, it is useless

to obtain the above permission from the top ranking National Guard officer, if the city police is the agency responsible for making curfew arrests.

An example of the effectiveness of these techniques was the entree I was able to gain with the chief of police of the riot city during the student riot after the invasion of Cambodia. I caught the chief between calls on his walkie-talkie, flashed an identifying business calling card, displayed my tape recorder conspicuously, dropped the well-known names of the directors of the research organization for which I was working, and reminded him that his department had worked with us before. I was thereby able to quickly obtain his official permission to monitor his walkie-talkie calls, ride on cruiser calls with him, and conduct my observations with immunity to arrest on curfew violation charges.

Entree with law enforcement agencies is a valuable asset in mitigating several types of bias which arise. One such area of bias concerns sampling. Without immunity from arrest on curfew violation charges the researcher would be unable to include in his sample of observations any activities occurring after hours in the curfew zone. (Of course, he still has the alternative of remaining in the zone and exposing himself to increased physical danger and possible arrest.)

Another benefit afforded by entree and rapport with higher echelons of law enforcement agencies is that the researcher may obtain permission to both observe from among their ranks and speak to the men directly. The latter point alleviates the bias of obtaining a one-sided report (that of the demonstrators) when the law enforcement personnel are otherwise ordered not to  speak  to civilians.  Viewing  the activities from among the ranks of the

law enforcement agency also helps the researcher obtain a more balanced perspective. But it has the disadvantage of exposing the researcher to physical danger if bullets or other missiles are being directed at the law officers.

Another source of bias is the fact that one's location determines the substance of his observations. And, in turn, the observational location can be determined by such factors as bullets, projectiles, tear gas, and fatigue. If the researcher is on the police side of the battle lines, he may find it possible to temporarily obtain from the police surplus protective equipment against the first three of these factors. And he may be able to combat his fatigue by obtaining rides in police cruisers to scenes of activity. This transportation assistance combined with access to police communication also enables the researcher to sometimes know about, and get to the scene of new confrontations for which he might otherwise have arrived too late, if at all. However, he must be on guard against the bias of concentrating too much attention on the violent and the spectacular, at the expense of more subtle but equally important social phenomena. Such an attraction to violence may even reflect the observer's own personality or emotional needs (Schwartz and Schwartz, 1969: 99, 102).

#### Equipment

The use of mechanical recording devices in a civil disorder, as in any social research, has its advantages and disadvantages. McCall and Simmons (1969: 74) point out that: "tape recorded notes help to orient one's fellow workers (or even oneself at a later date) as to what the field



situation was at the time certain data were obtained. . . . The review of such recordings is a critical source of hypotheses for the redirection of the study." Related to this is the observer's heightened susceptibility to memory loss due to the excitement of the disorder situation -- observations tape recorded at the scene can go a long way toward mitigating this bias. Mechanically recorded data are also valuable to colleagues and partners in the vivid detail they convey and where different members of the same research team intend to use the same data for different purposes. Tape recording has the added advantages of speed and convenience. Events often occur in rapid succession in a disorder, leaving the observer no time to write notes and no place to sit down calmly by himself to organize his thoughts.<sup>2</sup>

The ideal situation for obtaining detail in observations is to also use a color camera (preferably motion pictures). This entails the disadvantages of reducing the researcher's mobility (which could be physically dangerous), increasing his dependency upon certain lighting conditions, and increasing his conspicuousness. Other more general advantages and disadvantages of using mechanical recording equipment are well presented by other authors (McCall and Simmons, 1969: 73 and sources cited by them).

However, if mechanical recording equipment is used (and the advisability of this depends upon the nature of the study) several factors must be taken into consideration. The first requirement for field equipment to be used in researching a civil disorder is that it be sturdy, as it is likely to be subjected to demanding tests, including running, bumping, falling, inclement weather, etc. In the event of its failure, a pocket

screwdriver with different interchangeable heads can be a godsend.<sup>3</sup> Equipment is also exposed to the risk of seizure or destruction by demonstrators who mistake the researcher for a police agent. (A student marshall reported having two walkie-talkies smashed under precisely these circumstances.) Apart from fast running, probably the only defenses against this are smooth talking combined with convincing and satisfactory identification.

In disturbances of appreciable magnitude it is not uncommon for law enforcement agencies to have a helicopter circling overhead. This noise presents considerable difficulties to the researcher who is dictating observations into a tape recorder. To overcome this and yet still be able to pick up crowd noises, etc., in other situations, two different microphones could be carried -- one with high and the other with low sensitivity to background noises. (Such a tactic would likely be necessary only in case of extreme disruption by the helicopter.) However, where background noises are recorded (intentionally or not) they should still be identified.

Next we come to two pieces of equipment which merit attention despite their seeming absurdity for a researcher. These are the protective helmet and the gas mask. Although they are extremely practical from the safety point of view, until they are more widely used by the demonstrators their presence on a researcher in a crowd of demonstrators is likely to hinder his research effort. First, they present problems of identity (e.g., police mistaking the wearer for an active militant; demonstrators mistaking the wearer for a police plainclothes agent). And secondly, the gas mask renders almost unintelligible any remarks which might be dictated into a tape recorder.

### Sources of Data

If mechanical recording equipment is used, many sources of data collection are available. The observer can dictate his observations into a tape recorder, as well as letting the recorder pick up crowd chants, screams, shots, etc. (a useful technique for relating the mood of the crowd to research colleagues later). The observer can seek more specific data by intruding as inconspicuously as possible on conversations of officials and others (bearing in mind ethical considerations). Since such discussions may often be held in the open air, they may be readily accessible. The yield from these discussions is often valuable in terms of insight gained into group dynamics, and in terms of tipping the observer off to recent or anticipated developments, thereby allowing him to choose a strategic observation point.

No civil disorder can be adequately researched by one person alone. There is great need for a coordinated team of researchers, at different vantage points, with different equipment, with different biases and perspectives, and using different data sources. For instance, it is impossible for a lone observer in a large crowd to obtain a clear account of what the speaker is saying while at the same time circulating around the periphery obtaining reactions of listeners there, while at the same time observing a confrontation five blocks away. And since an observer's role and status always limit his accessibility to certain situations (Dean, Dean, and Eichhorn, 1969: 21), it is particularly advantageous when other members of his research team are of complementary role and status (e.g., a black and

a "hippy" will gain entree where a "straight" white researcher would not).

Failing this, the use of informants (the "observer's observer") and respondents will be helpful in gaining information, impressions, feelings, etc. which the researcher was not present to gather first-hand. And even when the researcher was present himself, the use of respondents can serve as a cross-validating check on his own observations and reactions. This can be particularly helpful in avoiding the bias that occurs due to the difficulty in separating the researcher's own needs, moods, and emotions from those of the crowd.

The mass media and police radio are helpful in keeping the researcher abreast of current developments, especially in a prolonged and widespread disorder. Also, newscasts, newspapers, and flyers provide valuable supplementary and documentary data.

#### Fatigue and Excitement

Fatigue and excitement are examples of what Campbell and Stanley (1966: 5-6) call "instrumentation" factors. That is, they produce changes in the observer (the "measuring instrument") which may in turn affect the observations. Fatigue produces two main instrumentation effects. First, it reduces sensitivities in observing; and secondly, it can introduce biases in selecting what events are to be observed.

Excitement can also impair observational ability, acting in a similar fashion to anxiety (Schwartz and Schwartz, 1969: 100-101). This impairment may take the form of forgetfulness and oversights, of which we have

tentatively distinguished four types. The first is simple memory regression, i.e., forgetting the who, what, where, when, why, and how of any given incident. This phenomenon is characterized by a distinct form of retention versus time-elapsd curve and is well documented in the psychological literature (Kimble and Garnezy, 1963: 233).

The second type of forgetfulness involves comparative reconstructions. We are concerned here with comparisons with past civil disorders. The tendency of the researchers may be to become so engrossed in the excitement of the present disorder that he fails to be cognizant of similarities and differences which exist between this and past disorders. He will be particularly susceptible to overlooking that which is not occurring in the present situation but which may have occurred in other disorders (e.g., live coverage television cameras and their floodlights). Avoiding these oversights can contribute significantly to an understanding of why one disorder developed one way whereas another followed a different pattern. However, there also exists the opposite danger of allowing previous field experiences to implicitly shape (and bias) the categories with which succeeding disorders are viewed. Thus, one must be alert to conceptual differences in every field experience.

The third type involves the failure to explicitly distinguish between multiple perceptual stimuli. This occurs when the researcher observes a phenomenon and records these observations, taking for granted many details which are evident to him, but which, unless explicitly recorded, will be lost to future readers, listeners, etc. (including himself sometimes). Thus, he should not allow the excitement of the situation to make him

forget to attend to perceptions of any of the five senses. For instance tape recordings of sounds should be accompanied by dictated or written notes on accompanying visual, tactile, and olfactory cues. It is also important to note the time of day or the adequacy of lighting since lighting conditions are a source of bias. (For instance, details which are clearly visible during the day may be obscured at night; and perceptual distortions are also more likely at night.)

Finally, the fourth common type of error due to excitement may be called instrumental oversights, referring mainly to equipment adjustments. Examples here are speaking into a microphone while forgetting that it is turned off or taking a picture without a flashbulb.

#### Ethico-legal Considerations

Due to various peculiarities surrounding civil disorders, research into them necessarily involves many complicated ethical and/or legal considerations. Although these considerations certainly arise in the analyzing and reporting stages of research, the focus here is on the data collection stage. We deal here only with some of the more prominent concerns.

These problems may be straightforward as subjecting oneself to arrest for curfew violation with all the accompanying ramifications (which may be particularly grave for a visiting foreign researcher). Or they may be as ambiguous as the susceptibility of research notes and data to subpoena, with the ensuing violation of the confidentiality of the data. Protecting data sources is a related prominent concern, especially where illegal acts are involved. Consider also the ethical position of the researcher who seeks

police cooperation (in any of a multitude of ways) but who, in return, is asked by the police to identify a demonstrator whom he witnessed committing a criminal act.

Another ethical consideration involves the choice of the research role and type of data collection techniques used. For instance, we pointed out how in unstructured situations such as the street crowd, outsiders tend to be ignored if they are not too conspicuous. This invites eavesdropping by the researcher but entails the problem of violating subjects' rights to privacy without those rights first being waived by them (McCall and Simmons, 1969: 73). This problem is particularly salient when mechanical recording devices are being used and when a group has been secretly infiltrated by the researcher (Webb et al., 1970: v - vii and sources cited).

Obviously no hard and fast ethico-legal rules can be laid down. Rather, the purpose here is to testify to the myriad of such ponderous dilemmas inherent in the civil disorder situation. Unfortunately, in the field the need is sometimes to arrive at a decision rapidly and with finality.

#### Conclusion

In specifying and illustrating the concerns and problems encountered in qualitative research into ongoing civil disorders we note both similarities and differences with respect to qualitative analysis of other topics. In the civil disorder field situation these similarities will be recognized as calling for an application or extrapolation of previous experience and knowledge in methodology. As for the differences, it is felt that they can be coped

with more satisfactorily if the researcher is aware of them in advance.

It is hoped that this paper is a step in the direction of more systematic preparation for both the similar and the peculiar features of field research into future civil disorders.



#### FOOTNOTES

1. In most civil disturbances to date, the wearing of a necktie and sport jacket would usually contribute towards this effect of "being apart," whether is be apart from the uniformed police or from the demonstrators.
2. And even when tape recordings are used it is important that the observer play back the tapes within a few days and edit them by inserting explanatory remarks and other comments that come to mind as observations crystalize around central themes.
3. However, the carrying in one's pocket of sharp objects such as a screwdriver or pen can be dangerous if one should stumble and fall in the midst of a crowd fleeing from a teargas attack.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, William A.  
1970 "Role Salience and Social Research: The Black Sociologist and Field Work Among Black Groups." *American Sociologist* 5, no. 3 (August): 236-239.
- Campbell, Donald T., and Julian C. Stanley.  
1966 *Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Research*. Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Dean, John P., Lois R. Dean, and Robert L. Eichhorn.  
1969 "Limitations and Advantages of Unstructured Methods." Pp. 19-24 in George J. McCall and J. L. Simmons (eds.), *Issues in Participant Observation: A Text and Reader*. Reading, Mass.: Addison Wesley.
- Gunther, Max.  
1970 "What Really Happened in Ashbury Park?" Pp. 8-11 in *TV Guide* (September 26). Radnor, Pa.: Triangle Publications.
- Junker, Buford.  
1960 *Field Work: An Introduction to the Social Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kimble, Gregory A., and Norman Garnezy.  
1963 *Principles of General Psychology*. 2nd Edition. New York: Ronald Press.
- McCall, George J., and J. L. Simmons (eds.).  
1969 *Issues in Participant Observation: A Text and Reader*. Reading, Mass.: Addison Wesley.
- Schwartz, Morris S., and Charlotte G. Schwartz.  
1969 "Problems in Participant Observation." Pp. 89-105 in George J. McCall and J. L. Simmons (eds.), *Issues in Participant Observation: A Text and Reader*. Reading, Mass.: Addison Wesley.
- Walker, Daniel.  
1968 *Rights in Conflict*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Webb, Eugene J. et al.  
1970 *Unobtrusive Measures: Non-Reactive Research in the Social Sciences*. Chicago: Rand McNally.