Fieldnotes and note-taking

There is no absolutely right or wrong way to write field notes and there are various ways to create records of observation and casual conversations. Personal preference and practicalities can influence your decision about how you approach field notes.

Your field notes should record:

- Any interesting/significant **informal** conversations. Where, with whom, about what?
- Any significant **observations** (about non-verbal aspects of research context). Where, about whom, about what?
- Anything **surprising** or interesting that came up during the day. Was there anything that went **against your expectations**?
- Things that people said or did that reflected their **taken-for-granted** understandings.
- New issues that have been coming up **repeatedly** that are **not** covered in your interview schedules.
- Issues that should be developed and explored in subsequent interviews or further observations.
- Issues that should be taken into account during data analysis

For day-to-day recording in the field sites:

- A **clip board** and paper is recommended for taking notes in research site and a register book to write up more detailed notes later
- It is absolutely vital to write up **in detail on the same day** (to avoid confusions and memory lapses)
- In a team project: One team member can write up on one side of page their observations, informal conversations, reflections on the day's activities. The other team member can then read and add their own comments on the blank side page. (This might include issues omitted, more details, and own responses to situations).

During periodic visits back to a base (out of the field site):

- Type up all notes from the registers if not already done
- Reflect on your own and your team's work. This might include the research progress and achievements, common or different themes that are emerging, and the collation and comparison of findings.
- This reflection can be part of your preliminary analysis. It is important to feed these reflections into the next stage or round of data collection to build on, improve, and contextualise the research.

Note-taking during interviews and fieldwork

Why you (or someone sitting with the interviewer) should take notes during interviews:

- Sometimes people might decline the use of a tape recorder
- Sometimes a tape recorder might be inadequate. For instance, when there are several people present and making comments, or if there is a lot of external noise
- Sometimes tape recorders fail: batteries run down, microphones aren't properly making contact, or the interviewer fails to turn the recorder on. Even if all this works, interviewees may turn away just when they are saying very important things, and the microphone may not pick it up.
- Sometimes recorders might be difficult to introduce into the discussion. For instance, when informal conversations unexpectedly turn into more formal affairs.
- Transcribing is a very long and tedious process: notes help to remind you what is in the interview, and where to find the really important material.
- Notes help you record the non-verbal aspects of an interview that a tape-recorder might not pick up. For instance, a participant's body language.

How you should take notes on interviews, observations or casual conversations

1. Need to distinguish between different kinds of notes:

   a. **'head-notes'** may be short key phrases that remind you what was said, in what order, and are taken down (preferably) immediately; for 'head-notes' you should use the language of the interview if possible. If two researchers are present, one should 'interview' and the other should take notes. If you change roles during the interview, it is important to remember that someone must be taking notes. If notes cannot be taken at the time, for some reason, head-notes must be taken as soon as possible afterwards.

   b. **'field-notes'** are an attempt to reproduce as clearly as possible what was said. For field-notes there are dilemmas in writing up the interview in the local language, the native language of the interviewer, or in English: all have their costs and benefits. In all cases, however, writing field-notes must take place within 24 hours, and preferably within 6 hours: after that the quality deteriorates very fast. For recorded interviews, listen to the recording and check that it is clear *all the way through*. If so, field-notes for the interview may not need to be so detailed. Or you may choose to listen to the recordings only for the quotations that are central to the research questions. In either case, fieldnotes should **always** include 'atmosphere and context'.

2. Language is always an issue (see separate handout). Because of the issues of translation, important items (phrases, sentences or even short paragraphs) should be reported as closely as possible in the actual words used. In the final version of an interview or observation, the words could be in italics in the original language before or after the translation, so that native speakers can judge if you have done a good job.

3. Value judgements (or too rapid leaps to analysis) should be avoided as far as possible: in your fieldnotes, try to describe accurately, cautiously and fully instead. For instance, do not write 'it was obviously the compound of an educated family' but write 'there was a desk with three textbooks open, perhaps because we interrupted revision for the eldest child'.

4. Try to include in your fieldnotes something on the most important observation topics of your research, at least for the first visit to each field site.