Exercise 13.3

I reproduce below a quotation from Barry Glassner and Julia Loughlin used earlier in this chapter:

> In more positivistic research designs, coder reliability is assessed in terms of agreement among coders. In qualitative research one is unconcerned with standardizing interpretation of data. Rather, our goal in developing this complex cataloguing and retrieval system has been *to retain good access to the words of the subjects*, without relying upon the memory of interviewers or data analysts. (1987: 27, my emphasis)

Now write a short piece (say 1000 words) explaining how your own data analysis provides the reader with good access to your original dataset. Check out this piece with your supervisor and other students. If they think it works, you may be able to use it as part of your final methodology chapter.

Part Four
KEEPING IN TOUCH

14
Keeping a Record

Record-keeping seems like a very dull activity. It may conjure up a picture of boring account books or even of Dickensian clerks with wing collars poring over ledgers in a gloomy nineteenth-century office.

In this short chapter, I will try to convince you that good record-keeping is not a dull and lonely activity but a fruitful, even enjoyable, way of establishing a dialogue with other people. It should be noted that these other people include yourself and your thoughts as they were a few years, months or even days ago.

The two principal areas of record-keeping discussed below are:

- a record of your reading
- a research diary.

RECORDING YOUR READING

By the time you begin a research degree, it is likely that you will have learned the habit of keeping your reading notes in a word processed file, organized in terms of (emerging) topics. I stress 'reading notes' because it is important from the start that you do *not* simply collate books or photocopies of articles for 'later' reading but read as you go. Equally, your notes should not just consist of chunks of written or scanned extracts from the original sources but should represent your ideas on the *relevance* of what you are reading for your (emerging) research problem.

So read critically. Don't just copy chunks of material. Strauss and Corbin (1990: 50–3, adapted here) suggest that the existing literature can be used for five purposes in qualitative research:

1 *To stimulate theoretical sensitivity* 'Providing concepts and relationships that [can be] checked out against [your] actual data.'

2 *To provide secondary sources of data* These can be used for initial trial runs of your own concepts and topics.
3 *To stimulate questions during data gathering and data analysis.*
4 *To direct theoretical sampling* To 'give you ideas about where you might go to uncover phenomena important to the development of your theory'.
5 *To be used as supplementary validation* To explain why your findings support or differ from the existing literature.

Following Strauss and Corbin, you should always approach any publication with a set of questions, for instance:

- What are the relevant findings?
- What are the relevant methodologies?
- What are the relevant theories?
- What are the relevant hypotheses?
- What are the relevant samples?
- What is the relevance to how I now see my research problem?
- What possible new directions for my research are implied?

Exercise 14.1 gives you an opportunity to test out your skills in using the existing literature to help you in your own research. It emphasizes that we should never read such literature without having formulated some prior set of questions.

It goes without saying that you should use a consistent system for referencing authors and other details of the material you are reading. The Harvard method of referencing is usually the system chosen in the humanities. This involves entering an author's surname, followed by date of publication and any page reference in your main text, as follows:

Abrams (1984: 2); Agar (1986: 84)

By using this method, you can save footnotes for substantial asides rather than for (boring) references. Detailed references are then appended in a bibliography in a form such as the following:

Abrams, P. (1984) 'Evaluating soft findings: some problems of measuring informal care', *Research Policy and Planning*, 2(2), 1–8
Agar, M. (1986) *Speaking of Ethnography*, Qualitative Research Methods Series, Vol. 2, London: Sage.

In Chapter 18, I discuss how such records of your reading can be integrated into the literature review chapter of your thesis. When you come to write that chapter, ideally towards the *end* of your research, you will have all the relevant material on file. But, just as important, you will also have a record of your changing thoughts about the literature and its relevance to your emerging research topic.

RESEARCH DIARIES

We commonly find the sense of the past in the present. Such 'rewriting of history' (Garfinkel, 1967) means that, unless you are careful, you may forget important aspects of your early thinking about your research which may be crucial to your readers' understanding. One way to ensure that you spell out your reasoning is to keep a research diary.

This will avoid presenting the reader with an apparently 'seamless web' of ideas which conceals the development of your thinking with all its setbacks and dead-ends. In this way, 'the text can be like a detective story, where one presents these kinds of "false leads" until they are revealed to be dead-ends' (Alasuutari, 1995: 192).

Another danger with the 'seamless web' picture of research is that it can conceal various tricks, sleights of hand and simple mistakes through which you reach your conclusions. Keeping proper records, including a research diary, helps to make your reasoning transparent – to yourself as well as to your readers. In this spirit, Huberman and Miles call for:

> careful retention, in easily retrievable form, of all study materials, from raw field notes through data displays and final report text. (1994: 439)

Keeping such careful records means that you will be amassing material that can form a substantial part of the methodology chapter of your thesis (see Chapter 19). It also implies an open-minded and critical approach to your research. This is what Huberman and Miles mean by 'a reflexive stance'. It involves:

> regular, ongoing, self-conscious documentation – of successive versions of coding schemes, of conceptual arguments . . . of analysis episodes – both successful ones and dead ends. (1994: 439)

In Table 14.1, I summarize the uses of a research diary.

TABLE 14.1 **Why keep a research diary?**

1	To show the reader the development of your thinking
2	As an aid to reflection
3	To help improve your time management
4	To provide ideas for the future direction of your work
5	To use in the methodology chapter of your thesis

Source: adapted in part from Cryer, 1996: 73

As an example of the kind of material that can be put into a research diary, here is an extract from Vicki's diary that we first came across in Chapter 2:

VICKI'S RESEARCH DIARY

SOLID PROGRESS (MARCH–MAY 1996)
Continued transcribing extracts. Also wrote chapter on natural history of the research process (to date), chapter on HIV counselling, chapter on offers, sent to DS for comments.

DISASTER (MAY 1996)
Hard disk crashed: lost two chapters and some data files that were not backed up!! Also lost draft chapter prepared on offers.

CONFERENCE (1–5 JULY 1996)
Went to 4th International Social Science Methodology Conference at Essex University. Set out framework for overall PhD and timetable.

WORKSHOP (19–21 SEPTEMBER 1996)
Went to CA weekend data workshop organized by Sarah Collins. This was a good experience for me. I came away feeling very confident about my data and the direction of my research.

DESPAIR (OCTOBER 1996)
Time spent trying to recover data and get transcript back to where had been six months previously – disheartened!!

TIME OUT (OCTOBER 1996 TO JANUARY 1997)
I felt I had achieved next to nothing since my hard disk crashed in May. I took time out and went to Australia to visit my sick brother.

STARTING UP AGAIN (JANUARY–MAY 1997)
Transcribed new data (transcripts 10, 14, 15) and identified other transcripts for transcription and identified extracts within these. Became interested in how doctors' clients responded to the offer to see the health adviser. Key themes: offers of screening tests for other STDs; offers to see the health adviser; and offers by doctors and health advisers.

This extract from Vicki's diary covers most of what a research diary should contain, namely (adapted in part from Cryer, 1996: 74):

- your research activities with dates
- your reading (see below)
- details of data collected
- directions of data analysis including 'special achievements, dead-ends and surprises'
- your own personal reactions
- your supervisor's reactions and suggestions.

It is also possible to write a research diary in a more structured form. For instance, in ethnographic research it may make sense to distinguish data

analysis from the data itself, using square brackets for analytic observations (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 164).

In a still more formalized approach, following Glaser and Strauss (1967), Laurel Richardson (1994) has suggested that you organize your notes into four different categories:

1 *Observation notes* (ON): 'fairly accurate renditions of what I see, hear, feel, taste, and so on'.
2 *Methodological notes* (MN): 'messages to myself regarding how to collect data'.
3 *Theoretical notes* (TN): 'hunches, hypotheses . . . critiques of what I am doing/thinking/seeing'.
4 *Personal notes* (PN): 'feeling statements about the research, the people I am talking to . . . my doubts, my anxieties, my pleasures' (1994: 526).

The truism that 'there is no one right method' applies to the keeping of research diaries as to so many other aspects of research. Whether you use a more or less structured method of diary-keeping, the most important thing about keeping a research diary is that it will encourage you to be *meticulous* in record-keeping and *reflective* about your data. As Hammersley and Atkinson comment:

> The construction of such notes . . . constitutes precisely the sort of internal dialogue, or thinking aloud, that is the essence of reflexive ethnography . . . Rather than coming to take one's understanding on trust, one is forced to question *what* one knows, *how* such knowledge has been acquired, the *degree of certainty* of such knowledge, and what further lines of inquiry are implied. (1983: 165)

SUMMARY

Keeping a record should involve both making an ordered record of your reading and keeping a research diary. In a research diary, you can show your readers the development of your thinking; help your own reflection; improve your time management; and provide ideas for the future direction of your work. As we see in Chapter 19, by keeping a research diary you can also be producing a substantial part of the methodology chapter of your thesis.

Further reading

On keeping a record of your reading, see Strauss and Corbin's *Basics of Qualitative Research* (Sage, 1990), Chapter 4. Pat Cryer's *The Research Student's Guide to Success* (Open University Press, 1996), Chapter 7, is a useful account of why and how to keep a research diary. On keeping more specialized notes about your data, see Richardson (1994) and Strauss and Corbin, Chapter 12.

Exercise 14.1

Below is an extract of around 300 words from my book *Discourses of Counselling: HIV Counselling as Social Interaction.*

1 Read the passage and make notes from it (no more than 100 words) appropriate to a thesis on the nature of professional–client communication.
2 Now repeat the process on the assumption that your thesis topic is 'effective AIDS counselling'.
3 What relevance, if any, does this extract have to your own research? Note that such relevance can be methodological and theoretical as well as substantive. This means that a reading can be useful even if your substantive topic is very different.

Three major points have emerged from this discussion of a small number of post-test counselling interviews. First, following Peräkylä (1995), 'cautiousness' is seen, once more, to be a major feature of HIV counselling. This is true of the activities of both counsellors and clients. Thus, these counsellors seek to align their clients to the disclosure of their test-result, while clients, to whom the character of counselling is presumably 'opaque', often demur at taking any action which might demand an immediate telling of their test-result (or indeed, many other activities, like directly demanding clarification of the validity of HIV-tests) even when, as here, given the right to decide the agenda of their counselling interview. However, these agenda-offers, unlike the alignment strategies discussed by Maynard (1991) and Bergmann (1992), are being used in an environment where the upcoming diagnosis is likely to be heard as 'good'.

Second, we have seen how, when clients respond to agenda-offers by introducing other topics than the test-result (e.g. volunteering statements about themselves or asking, usually indirectly, about the validity of the HIV-test), they seem to 'kick in' standard counselling responses (e.g. information and requests for specification). While such responses are consonant with normative standards of good counselling practice, they are, once again, produced in an environment in which their positioning (prior to the telling of the test-result) may be problematic.

Finally, we have demonstrated that, for at least one client, this delay in telling is problematic. As Ex 7 (and its continuations) showed, this client analysed the delay in the delivery of his test-result as implying that C was about to deliver a 'positive' result – by referring to 'support groups' for HIV-positive people.

This apparent lack of fit between a delayed delivery of the test-result and its content (i.e. as HIV-negative) leads directly into some fairly clear practical implications. (Silverman, 1997a: 106)

15

Relations in the Field

Two French qualitative sociologists have recently reminded us of the close association between ethnographic research and a sense of the studied world as a 'field' with emergent properties. As they put it:

> Ethnographic studies are carried out to satisfy three simultaneous requirements associated with the study of human activities:
>
> (i) the need for an empirical approach
> (ii) the need to remain open to elements that cannot be codified at the time of the study
> (iii) a concern for grounding the phenomena observed in the field. (Baszanger and Dodier, 1997: 8)

A whole series of practical questions about fieldwork now arise:

> what is the status of this 'specific' context in which the study takes place? How is it described? How is this framework delineated, since it is not a here-and-now situation, nor a situation in which mankind as a whole is characterized through the fundamental properties of every one of its activities? (1997: 11)

However, Baszanger and Dodier recognize that this concern for explaining observed activities in terms of social context does not apply to all qualitative research:

> this reference to field experience nevertheless distinguishes ethnographic studies from other observation methods that are not grounded in a specific field (analysis of conversation, situated cognition and ethnomethodology). (1997: 11)

So the meaning and significance of 'relations in the field' will vary according to the model of social research with which you are operating. For instance, as Gubrium and Holstein (1997) point out, while naturalists seek to understand social reality as 'it really is', using methods like prolonged observation and open-ended observation, this position is challenged from a range of directions by conversation analysts, feminists and postmodernists.

The obvious implication is that 'relations in the field' cannot simply be a technical issue to be resolved by technical means. Nevertheless, for ease of