10 The Case Study Paper

Teachers, social workers, and congressional assistants often must write case studies. When you are asked to write a case study in your introductory social science course, you are getting practice in an important professional skill. In social science, the observation of behavior is basic to other more sophisticated skills. Psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists are trained observers and recorders of the behavior of individuals and groups. They know how to see detail and to record what they see with great accuracy. When you write case studies for your social science courses, you will practice skills of close observation and accurate record-keeping.

Here are some examples of case study assignments:

- In your visits to a nursery school or child-care center, select one child for observation. Describe that child's language, social behavior, and motor and perceptual-motor capacities.
- Describe and analyze a small group to which you have belonged or belong now. Some areas you may discuss are the group's norms and values, subcultural characteristics, stratification and roles, ethnocentrism, and social control techniques.
- Describe the behavior of the patient you have been assigned as he/she interacts with you each week, both on the ward and in recreation areas.
- Describe the case history of HR1457 from its inception to its passage as a law.

The last example, a political science assignment to write the case history of a bill in Congress, requires certain specialized procedures that we will explain at the end of this chapter. The other tasks all involve direct observations of human behavior, while the political science assignment requires applying observational techniques more indirectly. But in all the assignments, your responsibilities in writing a case history include the following:

1 to decide what items of behavior to observe

2 to record the relevant behavior in detail and with a minimum of subjective judgment on your part

3 to group all of the observations into categories for a more careful study and discussion of them

4 To apply theoretical concepts to the categories for the purpose of explaining the observations.

Getting started

When you observe, you record objectively the details of what you actually see. You do not try to explain, interpret, or judge. Your eye is a camera. Only after you have made an accurate and complete record of observations can you begin to draw inferences from your data. As you read in chapter 2, inferences are conclusions. You cannot draw conclusions until you notice and record very carefully what the facts are.

Let us suppose that you are observing the behavior of a class of preschoolers. You see one child pull a toy away from a second child, who then cries. What should you record? Do not record that two chldren who don't like each other are having a fight. If you do, you will lose many valuable facts. Later observations may show that the first child always pulls that particular toy away from any other child who happens to have it. You may then want to draw a very different inference from the facts of the first observation combined with those of other observations. Also, if you establish a mindset too early, you may try to fit all of your observations into a pattern that is not really adequate to explain what is happening. You might pay too much attention to the interaction of the two children you first observed and miss other activities of both children.

Accurate observations are essential starting points for your case study paper. But in our everyday life we are not accustomed to seeing things keenly, and we rarely record what we see. To accustom your own eye to the sharper vision necessary for this assignment, try the following stratagem. Pretend that you and one of your classmates are working together as a team to observe this preschool class. You and your partner have read the same textbooks and have heard the same lectures, so you are bringing the same conceptual framework to your observations. But your partner is blind. As you both prepare to write your case study papers, you scrupulously tell your blind partner only what you see, not what you think the observation means. After all, you do not want to influence your blind partner with your conclusions. You want to give him an opportunity to form his own. You are conscientious about communicating only accurate, objective observations. You do not initially describe behavior as "lazy," "dependent," or "kind." Instead, you describe in detail what the people

do and say. Only later, after the observation period, do you draw inferences about what you have recorded.

But even for your blind partner you can legitimately refer to concepts in your textbooks to help make your observations something more than random. As we have explained earlier, academic disciplines are defined by the questions that they ask. Do not overlook your textbook as an aid to your vision. Chapter headings and subheadings may indicate general questions to bring to your observations. If you are writing a case study for a course in early childhood education, you should recall that the authors of your textbook have raised questions about the development of children. They categorize this development into motor, language, social, and cognitive. You should try the same categories. The authors of your sociology textbook have raised other questions: the size and composition of social groups, the degree and kind of social control, the definitions of standards (norms), and the consequences of norm violations. If you are writing this paper for an introductory sociology course, bring these categories to your case study of a small social group.

Even with the help of organizational principles from your textbook, you may have difficulty in focusing your observations without missing the obvious. Let us suppose that you are assigned in a psychology course to observe a litter of young animals periodically over a four-week period. At each observation you record such behavior as sucking, moving, and sleeping. But remember that the purpose of the assignment is to watch the process of development. Ask yourself what signs of growth you might see over a four-week period. Then record the appearance of the fur, for example, at each observation. Is it growing? At your first observation were the pups' eyes always closed? When was the first time that you saw them open?

Since your major goal in your observations is accuracy and objectivity, whenever you can count something, by all means do so. A frequency count involves recording the number of occurrences of a specific, narrowly defined behavior. For example, you might record the number of times a particular child addresses a comment or question to the teacher in a classroom. Or you might count the number of teacher-directed questions asked by several different children. In a description of social group behavior you might count the number of times the women on their way to market stop to greet people. Later, when you look over your recorded observations, you can base your inferences on something more than vague impressions.

After you have decided on the behavior to be observed, organize your notebook in columns or by pages so that you provide separate space for each category. Write on only one side of each page of paper. As you observe items in each category, record them in sequence, by date, time, or stage of development, in the proper space. You may find yourself developing, consciously or unconsciously, a shorthand system for recording observations. Whatever shorthand systems you develop, make sure

that you can decipher them accurately days or weeks later, and that they are, in fact, symbols for observations and not inferences.

Force yourself to record something about each category during each observing session. Write as much as you can. You should not assume that you will remember items without writing them down. You may wish to develop a checklist on which each item has to be checked after a record is made of the observations. A checklist, in column form, will show, in a dramatic, visual way, areas for which your record is incomplete.

During your recording periods, do not worry about recording too much. It is always possible to write a paper from too much information, but sometimes impossible to write one from too little data. In fact, at the end of your recording period you will probably possess an abundance of data that will not find its way into your paper. It is better to have this throwaway material than not to have sufficient material on which to base solid conclusions. Just as you have to be careful not to infer while you are observing, so you have to take care not to edit while you are recording. Especially when your paper is based on material collected from a series of observations, you must take very detailed notes. You may not know at first what areas of behavior will become interesting as your observations proceed. Without a written record of routine, boring, or seemingly unimportant observations, you cannot go back to make comparisons when a startling event occurs. Edit out useless material only after you have completed your observations, since only then will you be in a position to make decisions about what is important and what is not.

The final activity in getting started is to fit your grouped observations into the theories required to explain them. Now you can make inferences about the data. Try spreading all of your observation sheets out on the floor and grouping them by category into the concepts that you are studying in the course. One of the instructor's purposes for this exercise, remember, is for you to explain theoretically the behavior that you observe. Examples of concepts or theories in social science courses are: in child development—sibling rivalry, attention-getting behavior, motor skills, language development; in sociology—alienation, conformity, deviance; in psychology—identity diffusion, depression; in political science—single-issue campaigning, fear mongering. This list is merely illustrative. The concepts with which you are to work—from which you are to choose—will be presented in the course.

Your task is to select the explanation or explanations that best account for the observed behavior. It is possible that some behavior will fit several theoretical explanations. For example, a boy's response to a teacher's question about the number of children in his family might be, "My parents have one son and one daughter" when, in fact, there are two boys and a girl. This observed remark might be illustrative of sibling rivalry, attention-getting behavior, inadequate understanding of the concept of number, or semantic confusion of the words in the question. You may not be able to decide which theory or theories best explain an instance of

behavior at this point, but there are tests to apply. It might be possible to eliminate potential explanations if they are not consistent with other observed behavior. In the case above, if the boy did not display attention-getting behavior in other areas, or if he demonstrated facility with numbers, you might decide to eliminate these explanations. Similarly, different categories of behavior, when compared, might disclose a pattern that is best understood when a certain theory is applied. You may not, however, be able to explain a particular behavior after looking over your data. If not, simply note that some observations may fit into several categories and begin writing your first draft. Writing sentences and paragraphs is often a useful way to make connections and to generate ideas. The shape of your paper will help you to decide how best to account for your observations.

Writing the first draft

The first draft of a case study paper may be easier to begin if you start writing on each of the behavior categories, neglecting, at first, the introduction or opening paragraphs. Write on each category as if you were writing separate papers, on separate pieces of paper. You will probably find that you fill some pages and move on to second sheets for some categories, while you are able to write only a few sentences about other categories. You may find some sections easier to write than others. Concentrate on those. Do not worry, at this point, about finishing one section before going on to another. Your primary task is to get your ideas and connections down, to discover areas of difficulty, and to begin to make assertions.

When you have written what you can in all categories, it is important to go back to your observation sheets to make sure that you have thought about every relevant item in your notes. An example of notes prior to their being transformed into a first draft appears in figure 10.1. These notecards illustrate student observation of children in a preschool classroom. (T stands for teacher and A, B, C, D, and E are children.) You will see that a number of words have been abbreviated for rapid note taking. The student's first-draft attempts at converting the notes in figure 10.1 to prose are as follows:

Socialization

In socialization, A seems less mature than the other children. On one occasion she screamed for no apparent reason, but was happy when the teacher came over. She was seen pushing the other children who returned the push, but they were never seen initiating pushing against A. A did not share well. A spent a lot of time near the teacher. The other children were better able to

FIGURE 10.1
(on facing page)

free play period

A screamed when B appr.
T came over — held A
T return to gym group w. A
A stayed w. T
A push E, E hit A, T intervene

paper cutting for kites

T gave directions — kids talking
Kids cut on lines easily, except D
Must share paste among 3 kids —
A grabbed it 3x
C grabbed it 1x
D needed no help w. paste
All children tacked pic on wall themselves

story time

A push E, C push A in lining up
A push chair near T
A wiggles, talks to D (didn't hear what they said)
T review story and ask ?s.
B, C, D, E raise hands — T choose D and E to answer
and ? — D and C raise hand — A calls out answer
Children all sing and march at end of story
A reminded to march, not skip by T.

follow the teacher's directions for sharing, completing a task, or raising hands to answer a question than was A.

Does wiggling = unsocialized behavior?

Motor coordination

In large-muscle activities the children do not differ much. They all march and move chairs pretty much the same way. Cutting and pasting with construction paper was harder for D than for the other children.

Does wiggling belong in this section?

Don't panic if your first bout of writing does not produce insight. Inspiration is usually the result of diligence. Read again through your drafts of the different categories, not to edit them, but to discover meaning. Ask yourself, "So what? Why did I make all of these observations?" Reread your assignment sheet and ask, "Why would the professor assign this task? What am I supposed to learn?" How would you explain the children's behavior to your roommate if he asked about your case study? In fact, you might read an observation aloud and ask, "Now, why would X behave this way?" Another useful way to generate connections and explanations is to try to write out different explanations for each instance of behavior. When you actually press yourself to write justifications for each theory, you will find it easier to select the more plausible theories. Eliminate the ones that you cannot write about and try to develop, for each instance of behavior, the explanations that are left. Don't be afraid to jot down questions about inconsistencies. Your instructor may be willing to clarify areas of difficulty.

Once you feel comfortable with your conclusions and think that they are sufficient to explain your observations, you need to write an introduction that presents the general rationale for your paper. If you can write out a statement of purpose—the reason you are writing the paper, the behavior observed, and what you intend to demonstrate about this behavior—then you are ready to revise your paper for presentation. One student's introduction looked like this in draft form:

Introduction

~~This paper~~

~~A child's strengths in one area.~~

This paper describes several instances of behavior in a preschool child. The behavior

observed can be grouped into motor coordination, language, cognition, and socialization. Although the children are all the same age--four years old--and the same social class, they are not alike. Some children are better in one area, or poorer in another

Revising

In the first draft you are primarily interested in working out your ideas. The purpose of subsequent drafts is to write the paper for a reader. The final draft should be designed in form and language so that another person will understand explicitly what you are trying to say. A reader's interests are different from yours. For example, you may write your first draft as a narrative by following your observations from the first one to the last one. This sequence is natural because you went through the observations from beginning to end and remember the points at which you made discoveries. Also, you may be tempted to select the easiest principle of organization—chronological order. The reader, however, is not interested in the history of your observations. The reader wants to know what patterns you observed and what inferences you drew. Therefore, the proper form for your paper is not a narration about making observations, but a description and summary of the results of observations. Following are examples of narrative prose and explanatory prose of the same observations. The narrative paragraph, organized according to the time sequence in which the events took place, is all right for a first draft because chronological order frequently provides the easiest way to get thoughts on paper. The explanatory paragraph is organized with the main idea first, the remainder of the paper presenting details from the observations to support the explanation.

Here are notes translated into literal narrative prose:

Socialization

During free play time, I saw A scream when B came near her, and after that A stayed near the teacher. A didn't get into any real problems next, during the kite making, although she didn't share the paste well. When they had story time I saw A push somebody and be pushed back. She sat next to the teacher and talked quietly to another child. The teacher asked questions after the story, and A never raised her hand although she did call out an answer once.

Does wiggling belong in this section?

And here is a non-narrative revision of the above paragraph:

Socialization

A's behavior seemed less mature socially than the other children's. When another child came near her, A screamed for no obvious reason. She spent a lot of time near the teacher, both during free time and story time. The other children followed the teacher's directions to share paste, or to raise hands, or to march and sing better than A did. A pushed others and was then pushed in return. No one initiated aggressive behavior toward A.

It is important to remember that when you move from narrative to explanatory prose, you are not necessarily moving from a less formal to a more formal prose. Students sometimes tend to write in a stilted, artificial style when they organize their papers topically. The passive voice does not sound more scholarly. ("The observation was made . . .") Use the first-person "I" if it helps you achieve a clear, direct style.

As you revise, edit out value-laden, unsupported generalizations. When moving from description to inference, a writer has to move from descriptive words to evaluative words, and this shift increases the risk of choosing words that are not supported by the data as given in the paper. Keep the observations themselves as free as possible from value-laden descriptions. You will probably present your inferences and conclusions as generalizations. Do not be afraid to generalize, but make sure that your generalizations are built on solid detail. Here is an example of unsupported evaluations:

Our current president is a very attractive down-to-earth person and her leadership qualities are without question. Unfortunately, she will soon leave this position.

We have circled the writer's value judgments. If such words appear in your descriptions, you must be sure that they are not just "fillers," but grow out of the details of your observations.

One reason that your instructor assigned the case study paper was to help you learn theories and concepts in a particular social science discipline. Check your paper to be sure that you have used specialized language appropriately. Avoid extended definitions. Incorporate specialized vocabulary into the paper in a manner that shows an understanding of these terms. For example, the following paragraph contains the word "ostracizing," a term especially useful in explaining behavior in anthropology, sociology, and education, but the writer does not help the reader to

understand "ostracizing," nor does the writer show that he understands the term:

> Ostracizing is something she will not tolerate. Instead, she believes in stressing possible achievements. If a mother or child accomplishes something, you can be sure that Irma will give praise to them.

Any number of words could be substituted for "ostracizing" without changing the meaning of the assertion. Irma may be equally intolerant of "gossip," "rumor," or "mean talk." What is "ostracizing" in this context and why won't Irma tolerate it? The reader can't tell. The reader has no way of telling whether the word is understood by the student or is, in fact, the right word for the observation being made.

In the following example, in contrast, the student shows a clear understanding of "ostracizing" by creating a context in which the meaning of the word is unambiguous. The writer also has developed an accurate sense of the audience for whom he is writing. This writer does not assume that his instructor is his only reader. If the student had made that limited and misleading assumption, he might have stopped his description after the first, short paragraph, for certainly the instructor would understand how the terms apply to the situation. By thinking of peers, classmates, or roommates as his audience, this student has had to explain how the concepts apply to an actual situation. Because the writer has imagined a wider audience, he has written with the necessary degree of clarity and detail.

Social Control Techniques

> Like all primary groups, we expected conformity to the norms of the group in dress, speech, social behavior, and values. And like all groups we developed ways to enforce this conformity. The four ways we handled violations were sarcasm, gossip, physical punishment, and, as a last resort, ostracism.
>
> Of these, sarcasm and gossip were the more used and less severe. If, for example, a member got his hair cut too short, the others would make sarcastic remarks about his ears, the shape of his head, and so on. Gossip was used to correct behavior in such areas as girls and dealing with money. If a member was "hen-pecked" or "too tight" with his money, the others began to speak about these to each other until the offending

party found out. This form of reprimand was usually effective.

Physical punishment was employed to correct continued violations of minor values or first-time violations of major values. If, for example, a member was "too tight" with his money after the use of sarcasm and gossip, then he might be hit by one of the members of the group. If, as Rich did when he "ganged-up" on another person, a member violated an important norm, he might be physically roughed up or engaged in a full-scale fight. Usually, this form of correction occurred spontaneously without any member passing judgment verbally or formally.

Ostracism was the last resort in response to a member's deviant behavior. If any member knowingly violated one of the group's major norms, and continued to do so, the other members simply stopped associating with him.

Your conclusion, as well as your introduction, must be carefully constructed, for it is the part of your case study paper which ties together the disparate categories. Your final draft should be a unified paper. The conclusion should be used to reinforce this unity, but also to go beyond that which has already been stated to discuss the implications of your observations and explanation.

The case history of a bill in Congress: HR1457

Few undergraduates have the opportunity to go to Washington, D.C., to make first-hand observations about how a congressional bill develops into the law of the land. Sometimes this process takes several months or even years. Nonetheless, students of political science can, to some extent, bring techniques of close, systematic observation to the behavior of Congress, just as sociologists can bring these tools of the social sciences to their observations of more accessible social groups.

The *Congressional Record* provides a full, daily transcript of everything that transpires on the floor of the House of Representatives and the Senate. If you are interested in HR (House of Representatives bill) 1457, you would have available to you the full record of everything that was said and done about this bill on the floor of the Congress. The committees and subcommittees of the House also publish detailed reports of their hearings and deliberations. Few college libraries store the full *Congressional Record* and the reports of congressional committees, but with enough lead time, your college reference librarian can help you gather the printed information that you need. Besides these primary sources, you

can also read more indirect accounts in newspapers and in other printed material, both official and unofficial.

Although you are looking at words rather than at actual behavior, you are performing a task worthy of an apprentice political scientist, and you have responsibilities similar to those of the sociologist and the anthropologist who observe behavior first hand. You must decide what to focus on from the voluminous detail provided in the official transcripts. You must categorize your observations without leaping too quickly to subjective judgments. Finally, you must apply theoretical concepts to the categories for the purpose of explaning the observations.

Your first draft of the case history of HR1457 may describe the following sequence of events: Representative Alison Gray (Republican, Rhode Island) and Representative Joyce Kempner (Democrat, Pennsylvania) introduced HR1457 into the House on April 14, (year?). The Speaker of the House (name?) assigned the bill to a standing committee (which one? who are the members?). The chairperson (name?) of the committee gave the bill to a subcommittee (which one? who are the members?) for study and hearings. After debating the bill, the members of the subcommittee held hearings to allow experts and other interested parties to provide testimony to the subcommittee. The subcommittee finally returned the bill to the full committee with a recommendation to pass it. The committee accepted the subcommittee report and voted to send the bill to the floor of the House. On July 28, (year?) debate began. Several representatives (who?) proposed amendments (what?), but the full House accepted only two (which ones?) before passing the bill by voice vote. Senator Carol Waldman (Republican, Idaho) and Senator Louis Plaskow (Democrat, Maryland) had introduced a similar bill into the Senate on April 25, (year?). The Senate bill followed a similar course to passage, but the resultant legislation did not contain the two amendments, so the leadership in both houses appointed members (who?) to a conference committee to work out a compromise version to be sent to the president for his signature.

Now that you have systematically categorized your factual observations, you are in a position to ask questions that will lead to inferences about why the bill passed and what the bill actually means. Why did the Speaker select one committee rather than another to debate HR1457? Was the chairperson known to be sympathetic to the bill? How did the chairperson of the subcommittee select the witnesses who appeared at the hearings? Who lobbied for and against the bill? Was the purpose of the amendments to improve or to kill the bill? What were the significant divisions in the voting on the bill? What was the composition of the conference committee?

Only by answering such questions can you transform observations into inferences and write an essay that has a thesis ("The Congress passed HR1457, but hostile members of the conference committee undermined the original intent of the bill by accepting two House amendments which

effectively removed all enforcement mechanisms"). Without careful observation of the progress of the bill or without your application of theoretical concepts to explain the observations, you might be misled into asserting simply that the Congress passed HR1457 into law, when the crucial observation is that the law was significantly different from the bill.

Seeing and writing like a social scientist can help all of us to observe more carefully. We rarely take the time in everyday life to look at one another. In contrast, when we behave like social scientists, we must record observations systematically as preparation for drawing cautious inferences. Writing the exercises explained in this chapter can help us to see and to think more clearly.

We are reminded of a story that appeared in the press a few years ago about a first-grade teacher who wrote the following on the permanent record of one of her students: "Has unstable family life." This remark followed this child through his school years, affecting the way his teachers treated him. Finally, when the first-grade teacher was asked to reconstruct the observation that led to her inferences, she said that the boy's mother could never come to the school for daytime appointments and that on one or two occasions the child had come to school with broken shoelaces and his shirt on inside out. She had recorded only her conclusion, "unstable family life," without any supporting observations. Other teachers might have reached different conclusions from the same observations, but the first-grade teacher's omission of supporting data compromised the right of other readers of the record to draw their own conclusions. Her shaky inference took on the appearance of fact.

The reader of any case study has the right to object to your inferences. You must present enough carefully observed detail to make such objection possible.

QUESTIONS

1 What is a case study paper? What skills can be practiced by writing this type of paper?

2 What are your major responsibilities in "getting started" on this paper?

3 What are the important differences between observing and inferring? Why is it necessary to distinguish between them?

4 In what ways is the case study of a bill in Congress similar to a case study of individual human behavior?

EXERCISES

1 Along with some of your classmates, observe the behavior of a person (ideally one of your classmates acting out a role) and write down what the person does. Then write down what you believe the person was actually trying to do or communicate. Compare your observations and inferences with others. Account for the disagreements.

2 Write your own paragraph from the data in figure 10.1. Compare your paragraph with the examples provided in the text.

3 Select an event that is currently in the news, preferably one that is ongoing, such as the campaign of a politician, and collect daily news articles on the topic for a period of time—a week, a month, or two months. Using the material in this chapter, write a case study paper on the event.

4 Analyze and evaluate the following paragraph from a case study paper.

> Michael is a preschooler who does not like to be away from home every morning. He comes reluctantly to nursery school and, the minute his mother leaves, begins to act aggressively. Sadly, he has no siblings to interact with at home, so he has not learned how to relate to other children. He is unhappy, bored, and doesn't even like the cookies at midmorning break. He doesn't respond to our gentle encouragement and might be better off at home with a sitter.

5 See the Appendix for a set of extended instructions for "The Mama Rat Project," a case study that is assigned annually to freshmen in Psychology 101 and English 101 at Beaver College. Your own psychology department may be willing to set up a similar observational opportunity.