6 The Data Base and some Analytic Considerations

I IMPROVING THE DATA BASE

The exploratory character of the studies we have been able to do so far has been referred to at various points in the preceding chapters, and it will by now be clear that it has only been possible to focus on a limited range of analytic concerns. Nevertheless, it is hoped that these will have served as an exemplification of the kind of research that may be entailed by adopting the approach outlined in Chapters 1 and 2, and to establish a case for pursuing such investigations further. In this chapter, however, we want to draw attention to some of the more obvious limitations of our studies, and to various ways in which future research (some of which is already under way) might improve on them, either by looking more closely at similar issues, or by investigating others which have yet to be considered. To this end we comment first on the data base and how it might be improved, before making some tentative suggestions about a number of technical problems to which further research might be addressed. These latter are, for the most part, additional to the issues considered in earlier chapters, and have been selected partly to illustrate how the availability of tape-recordings facilitates observations and analyses which could not be done with reference to the main data base used in the research to this point.

In noting that there were obvious shortcomings in the data base for the preceding chapters, we have in mind at least two important ways in which it could be regarded as less than satisfactory. In the first place, it may seem that the particular types of court hearing from which much of the data was taken reflect somewhat obscure, if not downright eccentric, choices. Secondly, the form of data subjected to detailed examination (i.e. official transcripts and ones derived from notes taken in a public gallery) may appear to be hardly adequate in terms of our own introductory remarks about the advantages of recordings as a source of 'raw
data', which is not pre-organised by the researcher's descriptive prac-
tices prior to the start of any analysis. To the extent that these can be
construed as criticisms of our work, we are in the somewhat paradoxical
position of being prepared to agree with them in a general sense (and
especially as far as further research is concerned), but at the same time to
disagree that they can necessarily be forcefully made against our particu-
lar studies and the way they were presented. In this first section, then, an
ttempt is made to clarify what we mean by this, and to show how there
may be nothing paradoxical or inconsistent about adopting such a
stance.

To the charge that a Coroner's Court and a Tribunal of Enquiry are
unusual hearings on which to base a study claiming to have a wider
relevance for the problem of court-room interaction, various defences
can be offered in addition to the accidents in our academic biographies
which originally led us to them.' Such a complaint, for example,
presupposes that sociologists should focus their research on 'more usual'
types of court hearings, meaning presumably those which are held with
greater frequency, or which deal with more regularly occurring routine
business. Alternatively, it might imply that we ought to have studied
'more important' court hearings, where the criteria for assessing relative
importance would have to be specified stipulatively, with reference
perhaps to assertions about certain social, political or economic
priorities. Either way, such a criticism would seem to involve the further
assumption that decisions as to analytic focus should be dictated by
things which members already know to be 'important' practical prob-
lems. And such a basis for making choices about the focus for research
can be seen, in the light of remarks made in Chapter 1, as a first step
towards the kind of unexplicated reliance on members' resources that
our approach specifically seeks to avoid. In other words, it would involve
asserting the primacy of members' practical concerns as grounds for
making research decisions. In the event, of course, it has to be admitted
that our choices were originally influenced by our concerns 'as members'
with what we knew in advance, and knew that others knew, to be serious
social problems (i.e. suicide, and the troubles in Northern Ireland). As
our interest in ethnomethodology developed, however, we had to come
to terms with the initially disappointing realisation that, contrary to
what our earlier training had led us to believe, traditional sociological
research methods were unlikely to do more than facilitate the construc-
tion of theories which were similar in form and content to those already
available to and used by members in their 'lay' attempts to make sense of
and/or resolve such problems (c.f. Atkinson, 1978).