Sociology 272E Fall, 1994
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PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

In the natural science model, or more precisely in the "positivist" model for the study of the social world the relation between observer and participant is a contamination, a source of bias. In this view, social science is best conducted at a distance. Accordingly, the observer is separated from the participant -- a separation fostered by professionalization, and by the way the university insulates its members from the surrounding world. In participant observation the observer breaks out of the shelter and joins the participants in their everyday lives. This can lead to a different picture of social research. Problems that are otherwise repressed or bracketed now become central.

Participant observation brings home forcibly what is true of all social research, namely our relationship to those we study is not like the relationship of natural scientists to their objects of study. Our social theory is designed to explain the behavior of others but it reflects back on ourselves, who we are and what interests we have. However mediated the connection to our "subjects", we are all -- whether we bury ourselves in archives, conduct experiments on small groups, analyze surveys or censuses, or pose as an assembly line worker -- real or virtual participants in the world we study, so that "participant observation" can be considered the prototype of all social research. The political, ethical, methodological and theoretical dilemmas of all social research are most acutely experienced in the technique we call participant observation.

By emphasizing the relationship between participant and observer, "post-modernism" substitutes an interpretative analysis for explanatory theory. It is said that we neither can nor should do any better than develop an understanding of others and/or of ourselves. Explanatory theory is either impossible or immoral. Science's claim to universalism is a sham. It is one of many discourses without any privileged position. This is too easy a solution. Just as the interlacing of theory and interest lurks beneath the surface of positivism so post-modern ethnography is shot through with unexplicated, unjustified, arbitrary causal claims and explanatory theories. The rhetoric of anti-science makes a virtue out of bad science.

Wherever you may stand now and wherever you may end up at the end of this course I propose to begin by refusing the collapse into "post modernism" or "positivism" and to insist that there are two dimensions of social research: an axis of "science" which concerns the relationship between theory and data and a "hermeneutic" axis which concerns the relationship of participant to observer. The classical sociologies of Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Freud, in their different ways, refused the positivist repression of the hermeneutic dimension as well as the post-modernist repression of the scientific dimension.

ORGANIZATION OF THE COURSE

There are seven requirements to complete this course:

-- A proposal for research due August 22nd.
-- A critique of the extended case method due to September 7th.
-- Twelve weeks of field work
-- Writing field notes after each expedition into the field
-- Participation in a seminar that meets twice a week
-- A focused literature review due no later than October 19th.
-- A final paper due no later than December 7th.

1.Proposal

When they enter the field, participant observers face a deluge of information. Without some guiding lens they quickly drown. ***The purpose of the proposal, due on the first day of class, is to provide that initial lens. Around five pages long, it should describe the site you want to study, why you are interested in that site and what you expect to find when you get there.*** The more precise and detailed are your expectations, the more likely you will be wrong and, therefore, the more quickly your site will become interesting. You will be forced to confront your own prejudices, erroneous assumptions, and ask how it was that you were so off the mark. You will already have a puzzle and a rationale for continuing the study. You may change your mind about what is interesting but at least the proposal will give you a point of departure. In short, the proposal you will have the first draft of your final paper.

In choosing a site I encourage you to adopt one that is unfamiliar since you will be more easily surprised by what you find. In a place you already "know," you will have the advantage of understanding its hidden norms, its latent discourses but you will also take a great deal for granted. The familiar is more difficult to problematize, to turn the normal into the abnormal and surprising. Also, if you are a known figure in your chosen site, you may have less room to manoeuvre since your allegiances will be already cemented. If you do choose a familiar site then you will be more reliant on pre-existing theory and discussion with outsiders to problematize what you take for granted. For all of us, the seminar will be an important place to highlight the "extraordinary" in what appears to the observer become participant as natural and inevitable. In this connection you might want to read Merton's famous essay, "The Perspectives of Insiders and Outsiders."

2.Field Work

For the purposes of this course I will define participant observation as field research conducted in the time and space of the "subjects" rather than the observer. I also expect you to "interact" with your subjects, even though you may not be a full participant. I expect you to be in the field every week for twelve weeks. How much time you will spend there depends on the project but I expect a minimum of two mornings, afternoons or evenings a week.

Although interviewing can be conducted in conjunction with field work, by itself it is <u>not</u> participant observation because it takes "subjects" out of their normal day to day life, it segments the research process from the everyday life that is the object of study. Underlying this perspective on research, is the view that knowledge is contextually shaped, that interviews produce "data" that is formed as much by the interview itself as by the situation being examined. This is what ethnomethodologists call "indexicality." (See Garfinkel, <u>Studies in Ethnomethodology</u> or Cicourel, <u>Method and Measurement in Sociology</u>.)

Participant observers confront two hurdles: getting in and getting out. Entering the field site can be the most aggravating, unnerving, humiliating part of the field research. It often raises all sorts of ethical dilemmas. Yet to the extent it is emotionally draining and thwart with resistance (internal and external) so

it is all the more significant. Your attempts to "enter" can provoke a crisis situation not only for yourself but for those you want to study and thereby reveal much of what is normally hidden or taken for granted. Barriers to entry display the "values," assumptions," and above all "interests" of those you are about to study -- the theories they hold about the external world from where you come. As Paul Rabinow says in Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco field work always involves symbolic (and sometimes real) violence. The more "blunders" you make, the more embarrassed (humiliated) you will be but the more you will learn. In short, "getting in" provides the most important materials you will collect, although their meaning will become apparent only later in the field research. ***It is imperative you record all your experiences around entry -- all the resistance and all the anxiety. this is not the pre-play before the real act.***

As an outsider, in a sense, you are always entering the field just as you are always "exiting" since you are presumably there on a temporary basis. However, just as the initial entry can be traumatic so can the final separation, depending on the attachments you develop. If you have been an overt participant observer, then you might have agreed or be expected to provide some final report at the conclusion of your study. Again, whether this be the paper you hand in to me or something tailored to those you study, reactions to your "findings" can reveal much about the people you study. (See, for example, William Foot Whyte's Appendix to Street Corner Society, Michael Bloor, "Notes on Member Validation," in CFR or the various responses to Nancy Scheper-Hughes study of sexuality in Ireland in the Reader.) It is rare for participants to fully endorse what you say and so their contestation becomes interesting even if it is painful. It might suggest refutation but just as likely gives further expression to the interests you have already described.

Although some regard hiding one's identity as sociologist as immoral, still not all participant observation is **overt**. (See the exchange between journalist Nicholas Von Hoffman and sociologists Irving Louis Horowitz and Lee Rainwater concerning the propriety of Laud Humphries' study of homosexuality. Or Kai Erikson, "Disguised Observations in Sociology.") Indeed, some studies, say of the John Birch Society, could only be conducted incognito. The choice between **"overt" and "covert"** strategy is in part shaped by the character of the site. In an unbounded, "open" setting which blends in with the wider society (shopping mall) it is easier to gain entry and then be an unobtrusive and anonymous observer whereas a bounded "closed" setting (prison) makes entry and anonymity more difficult. Whatever initial decisions you make about your identity -- I cannot stress this too strongly -- you will have to live with them throughout the study.

Linked to the choice "overt" and "covert" is the underlying question of interests. Participant observation effectively debunks the idea of interest free knowledge. In being thrown to the wolves, participant observers cannot avoid the interests of those they study. Already in the process of entry you build up ties of loyalty and obligation. But whose interests shall you recognize? There are always divisions and conflicts among those we study, between managers and workers, blacks and whites, untouchables and brahmins, teachers and students. On whose side are you? That's difficult enough. But negotiating your way through the maize of interests in the field only compels recognition of your own interests as sociologist, with a career ahead of you, whether it be making it through graduate school, developing feminist theory, getting tenure or becoming the President of the ASA. These professional interests are not necessarily compatible with the interests of any group in the field. Yes, we are on our own side too! (Take a look at Judy Stacey, "Can There be a Feminist Ethnography.")

While objections to participant observation may be wrapped in the garb of "science" people are reluctant to become participant observers simply because it provokes tension and anxiety, because it often unpleasant. It generates dilemmas to which there are rarely easy answers, and forces us to consider questions we would rather side-step. For most of us, it is easier to analyze surveys or demographic data or sit in an archive reading newspapers or even conduct interviews than to have to confront who we are as well as whom we study -- as we watch a class of inner city high school kids, join prostitutes on the street, participate in management seminars disseminating corporate culture, or join a RAP group. Life is not easy

for the participant observer. Or if it is, then we are not doing it properly.

3.Field Notes

There is no point in spending time in the field without writing up your field notes, and immediately after leaving the field. Loss of detail, mistakes, distorted reconstructions increase exponentially as time elapses from the original experience. I want to see five sets of field notes before the end of the semester.

In the beginning field notes should offer as much detail as possible. One should write down everything one can remember. (Making notes during the field to jolt the memory afterwards is very useful. If it's awkward to be seen writing then the lavatory is a good secret (re)treat.) The first set of field notes should describe the setting, the characters you interact with or observe and what they are up to. It is important you do this in the beginning when everything is novel since soon you will take so much for granted that it will be difficult to offer a vivid description.

At all times specific, concrete, detailed descriptions are crucial. What appears irrelevant in the beginning may turn out to be central in the end. The meaning of each field sortie is only unravelled in subsequent sorties. As the study progresses so questions emerge that will push you toward collecting certain types of data or perhaps suggest a change of field site. Field research is a process of discovery and reconstruction. In this connection you might want to look at Glazer and Strauss, The Discovery of Grounded Theory or Charmaz, "The Grounded Theory Method: An Explication and Interpretation" in CFR)

It is very easy to let the relationship between participant and observer overwhelm the research. Some would make a virtue out of such a loss of direction by collapsing the theory-data axis -- that is the examination of a particular problem through the organization and collection of relevant observations -- into a glorification of the self-understanding of other or even the discovery of self. This conjures up the stereotype of participant observation as "ethnographic" -- exotic tales from the field, that is descriptive and bereft of theory. I will discourage such a resolution of the tension between hermeneutic and scientific dimensions and instead insist ad nauseam that you justify your project, that you answer the question: **So what?** Why should anyone be interested in what you have to say? Why should one be surprised by what you observed in the field? How does your research add to sociological knowledge? How does it extend the understanding of those you are studying?

With this in mind, every set of field notes must be followed by paragraphs of analysis. That is, you should examine how the data you have recorded speak to the substantive problem you are studying. This is often the hardest part! As the field work progresses the field notes will become more focused and shorter as the analysis becomes more detailed and longer. I will not accept field notes without analysis. (For an interesting analysis of the double fitting of theory and data, see William Baldamus, "The Role of Discoveries in Social science" in FRSFM.)

4.Seminar

We meet twice a week except for designated breaks. I expect everyone to turn up to all sessions so don't schedule field work during the time of the seminar. Apart from the first few weeks, most of the sessions will be devoted to discussing your individual projects. Each student will present their work twice -- distributing it ahead so that we can come prepared with comments. The first time we will discuss a set of field notes with analysis and the second time a preliminary version of the final paper. We will learn through active participation and observation both in the class and in the field. We should think of ourselves as participating in every project -- actually in our own and virtually in the rest.

In the seminar you move from participant to academic. It is here that participant observers are forced to respond to the interests and concerns of other sociologists, that is, forced to develop the "scientific" dimension of their analysis. A second advantage of working intensively in a seminar lies in the

diversity of problems that are encountered. In effect we will be learning about the technique of participant observation not just through our own personal experiences but through the experiences of others too. Third, to examine the question of the sociological dimension of sociological knowledge and sensitize us to what it feels like to be studied one person has usually volunteered to study the class itself. Perhaps I'll study you this time.

Teaching and research are similar. The "positivist" model of social research first separates the observer from the participant and then places the observer over the participant. In the same way the "positivist" model of teaching first separates teacher from student and then places the teacher over the student. Just as the positivist model exhorts researchers to ignore the interests of those we study in favor of a single truth so the same model encourages teachers to view students as empty vessels into which truth is poured or pumped. In both cases power resides in the supposed superior knowledge of observer/teacher. Just as the technique of participant observation may engender an alternative interactive model of research which validates the "subject," so a similar effect may be achieved in a seminar which revolves around students' monopoly of knowledge about their projects.

5.Mid-Semester Literature Review

We will not only enter into a dialogue with those we study, and with our coevals in the seminar but also with a broader audience of social scientists. ***The purpose of the mid-semester paper is to locate your study in a pre-existing literature that deals or should deal with the emergent problem of your research. I leave it to you to search out the relevant literature, and to consult others more conversant with your substantive area.*** Precisely because you are engaged in a case study it is imperative that you be conversant with other studies. There is nothing more pathetic than rediscovering the wheel on the basis of a single case. In organizing the literature it may help to distinguish between studies or theories you want to refute or reject and those you want to develop or reconstruct.

6.Final Paper

As must be clear the final paper is not born in immaculate conception during examination week. We do not spend the semester collecting data, leaving to the last moment the elucidation of its meaning. To the contrary, you are continually in the process of producing that final paper beginning with your proposal. The analyses at the end of the field notes, discussions in and out of the seminar and in the field as well as the mid-term review are all part of a single seamless process, leading to a publishable essay.

The final paper should be no longer than thirty pages and have a clear argument and a memorable point. Papers longer than thirty pages usually suggest confusion or rapturous engagement with your field site. When it comes to ethnography length is more a vice than a virtue. It is always tempting to indulge a fascination with your subjects but the task at hand is to make them appear significant to someone who does not find them intrinsically absorbing.

7.The Extended Case Method

The studies conducted by your predecessors in Ethnography Unbound use what I have called "the extended case method." By the fourth meeting of the class I require a short critique (again four or five double spaced pages) of one of the case studies in the book.

Let me describe the extended case method in terms slightly different from those found in the book. The standard criticisms of participant observation can be reduced to Jack Katz's ("A Theory of Qualitative Methodology: The Social System of Analytic Fieldwork," in CFR) 4R's: reactivity, reliability, replicability and representativeness. Participant observers contaminate the data they collect by their participation; they have no systematic way of selecting from their mass of observations; they produce idiosyncratic results that cannot be replicated; they have no way of knowing how representative are their findings.

One response to these criticisms is defensive, that is participant observers can accept these

"positivist" principles as guidelines for research and try their best to emulate them.

-- Participant observers are exhorted to adopt an "objective" and, as far as possible, non-involved relation to their field site (see Herbert Gans, "The Participant Observer as Human Being," in FRSFM).

-- They should go about gathering and analyzing their data in a standardized manner (perhaps using one of the computer programs used for content analysis) (see Howard Becker and Blanche Geer, "Participant Observation: The Analysis of Qualitative Field data," in FRSFM).

-- They should make clear exactly how they have gathered the data so that someone can follow in their footsteps to replicate the study.

-- They should maximize the variance in the field by comparing situations so that their claims have greater generalizability (see Barney Glaser, "Generating Formal Theory," in FRSFM).

An alternative response is to reject the pursuit of any "objective" science and celebrate the interactive relation between participant and observer, the subjective and idiosyncratic character of research, and the uniqueness of its results. Thus, Susan Krieger, Social Science and the Self, insists that the exploration of self lies at the heart of social research. Most of what we know is ourselves and social science is therefore an expression of the self.

The extended case method offers a third alternative. It sets out from the argument that no social science research technique, including its prototype, survey research, can live up to the 4Rs.

-- First, surveys cannot avoid reactivity in the form of interview effects (race, gender of interviewer, order and form of questions, etc.).

-- Second, they may standardize questions but there is no control over the way respondents interpret them. This effectively undermines reliability.

-- Third, to claim replicability assumes that the context of the survey is identical at two points in time. This may be true of the chemistry laboratory but unlikely to be true for the social world.

-- Fourth, representativeness is based on extrapolation from a sample of individuals to a population. But if meaning emerges at the level of the situation rather than the individual then we should be studying a sample of situations not a sample of individuals.

In short there is an irrevocable gap between the theory of positivist science, that is the 4R's, and the practice of survey research as expressed by interview effects, respondent effects, context effects and situation effects.

If social research cannot live up to the 4Rs then we can legitimately turn to an alternative conception of social science, what I call a hermeneutic science.

-- First, the critique of reactivity is replaced by the embrace of inter-subjectivity as an inherent feature of all social science. Inter-subjectivity may not be real but virtual, as it is for demographers and historians, but it nonetheless involves a relationship between observer and participant.

-- Second, if we cannot standardize responses we are better off deciphering the meaning of what respondents say and do. We replace reliability with validity.

-- Third, if replicability is unattainable -- except for the most trivial of phenomenon -- because we cannot keep conditions of social research fixed, we should make a virtue out of a necessity and insist on locating all social situations in the field of relations which determine them.

-- Fourth, if we cannot obtain a representative sample because we don't know the population perhaps we are better off abandoning the idea of induction, that is, inferring theory from data. Instead we might use our case materials to challenge and then reconstruct pre-existing theory. This means choosing or constituting our cases on the basis of their theoretical relevance.

Just as survey research is the prototype of positivist science so the extended case method is the prototype of this hermeneutic science. There are, therefore, four moments to the extended case method.

-- Intersubjectivity is achieved through the extension of observer into the life world of the participant.

-- Validity is achieved through the extension of observations in time and place.

-- Contextualization involves the extension from the situation to the wider field of social relations.

-- Theoretical sampling of situation proceeds through the extension of theory, that is the reconstruction of preexisting theory in the light of anomalies.

However, adopting hermeneutic science and the extended case method by no means solves all problems. There is always a gap between theoretical model and its practical application. Joining our subjects in their space and time does not eliminate the relation of power between observer and participants and thus distorts mutuality of inter-subjectivity. Spending extended periods of time with our subjects does not eliminate problems of interpretation. Any field site is criss-crossed by multiple voices and founded on multiple layers of meaning. Recognizing that social situations are embedded in fields of social relations does not remove the problem of showing how each shapes the other. Finally, focusing on pre-existing theory does not tell us which theory to adopt. Any given social situation can be constituted as anomalous with respect to many different theories. These are the challenges for the extended case method.

ADMINISTRATION

1.Reading Material

There are four books available in ASUC, Howard Becker's Writing For Social Scientists, Susan Krieger, Social science and the Self, Michael Burawoy et al. Ethnography Unbound; Robert Emerson (editor), Contemporary Field Research; Robert Burgess (editor), Field Research: a Sourcebook and Field Manual. I have also a reader with commentaries on field work which I can make available. How much of such common reading we will discuss in class will depend on the time available. More important is to immerse yourself in a literature relevant to your substantive research questions.

2.Contract Grades:

1.Submit a proposal, a critique, undertake field work each week for ten weeks and submit five sets of field notes to me. This gets a C/C+/C-.

2.In addition to the field notes comment on the presentations given each week, give two presentations of your own work and write a mid-semester paper which locates your own project in a literature to which it will make a contribution. This could be a proposal or draft of the final paper. This gets a B/B+/B-.

3.In addition to (1) and (2) write the final paper. This gets an A/A+/A-.

There will be no auditors or incompletes.

3.Preliminary Schedule

August 22	Introduction
August 24	Field Notes. Geertz, "Thick Description," in CFR.
August 29	Howard Becker, Writing for Social Scientists
August 31	Susan Krieger, Social Science the Self
September 5	Labor Day
September 7	The Extended Case Method [Critique Due]
September 12	Whyte's Appendix to Street Corner Society
September 14	Kathy Charmaz, "The Grounded Theory Method," in CFR

September 19 - October 5th. Discussion of Field Notes: Two sets each seminar

October 10 - October 19. Preparation of Literature Review. Due October 19.

October 24 & 26: Readings to be Announced

October 31 - November 16. Discussion of Preliminary Papers

December 7: Final Paper Due.