

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-structuralism" 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-structuralism" 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-structuralist repression of the scientific dimension.

OVERVIEW OF THE COURSE

1. Requirements

This is a practicum in which you learning by doing, and by participating in the projects of your colleagues. We will fit in reading as best we can, depending on available time and interest.

There are six requirements to complete this course:

1. A 3-5 page (double-spaced) proposal for research due Friday, September 11th (email).
2. 10 weeks of field work
3. Writing field notes after each expedition into the field, and submitting 3 sets of field notes to me.
4. Participation in a seminar that meets for three hours week, giving two written presentations of your own fieldwork, and commenting on the presentations of others
5. A focused literature review around the topic of your research in lieu of a mid-term paper
6. A final paper of about 30 pages.

The Contract Grading System works as follows:

- 1 and 2 gets a C/C+/C-
- Plus 3 and 4 gets a B/B+/B-
- Plus 5 and 6 gets a A/A+/A-
- There will be no auditors or incompletes.

2. 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 second week of the semester, is to provide that initial lens. Around five pages long, it should (a) describe the site you want to study, (b) why you are interested in that site and (c) 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 becomes 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 is the first draft of your final paper.

It can be said, if they are successful, sociologists do two things: turn the unfamiliar into the familiar and turn the familiar into the unfamiliar. In choosing a site, if you adopt one that is unfamiliar, you will be more easily surprised by what you find, and so the task will be to normalize or conventionalize by fitting it into some body of theory. 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. Here you have to make the familiar unfamiliar, you have to turn the normal into the abnormal, the conventional into the surprising. Also, if you are a known figure in your chosen site, you may have less room to maneuver since your allegiances will be already cemented. If you choose a familiar site then you will be reliant on pre-existing theory or 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 Robert Merton's famous essay, "The Perspectives of Insiders and Outsiders."

3. 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 *not* participant observation because it takes "subjects" out of their normal day-to-day life, it segregates 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 are situations like any other as produce their own "data." In other words, interview responses are a function of the context in which they are produced as well as of the context to which they refer. This is what ethnomethodologists call "indexicality." (See Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* or Cicourel, *Method and Measurement in Sociology*.)

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 in itself – a crisis not only for you but for those you want to study. It, thereby, reveals 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 -- theories they hold about the external world from where you come, theories about Berkeley students or about sociologists or that devastating combination. 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" can provide 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-research but the real thing.*

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 and the depth of immersion. Read Allison Lurie's, *Imaginary Friends*. Again exit is a process that can and should be recognized as part of the field work. The most illuminating, but often most traumatic moment (or anti-climax), comes if and when you report back to the people you have been studying. This is especially so if they don't know you were studying them, but it is very interesting even if they are aware of your observational status. Their reactions can reveal much about who they are, and what

really concerns them. It is rare for participants to fully endorse what you write and so their contestation becomes interesting even if painful. It might suggest refutation of your argument but just as likely gives further expression or elaboration of what you have already written. (See, for example, William Foot Whyte's Appendix to *Street Corner Society*, or Michael Bloor, "Notes on Member Validation," or the various responses to Nancy Scheper-Hughes study of sexuality in Ireland.)

Although some regard hiding one's identity as sociologist is 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 your study.

Today Committees on Human Subjects make covert participant observation virtually impossible since they demand that social scientists obtain consent from the people they study. The implication is serious. It means that the rich and the powerful will be able to keep the ethnographer at bay whereas the poor and the weak, who have little to hide, will be the only populations the ethnographer can legitimately access. In other words, noble as the defense of our subjects is, nonetheless it has a distinct class bias.

Linked to the choice between "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, dalits 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 a 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 is 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 sex workers 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.

4. Field Notes

There is no point in spending time in the field without writing field notes, and, moreover, immediately after leaving the field. Loss of detail, mistakes, distorted reconstructions increase exponentially as time elapses from the original experience. I want to see three 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 WC is a good (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 expedition is only unraveled in subsequent expeditions. 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" and especially the popular, Emerson, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*.

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 the hermetic axis, and the glorification of mutual-understanding 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?

With this in mind, every set of field notes must be followed by 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 as it proceeds over time, see William Baldamus, "The Role of Discoveries in Social science.")

5. The Seminar

We meet for three hours every 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 week or two, 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. That's how you'll learn the craft of participant observation. The seminar will have two parts: in the first hour we will discuss a short common reading and in the second two hours we will discuss your projects and fieldnotes.

When you come to the seminar from the field, you move from participant to academic. It is here in the seminar 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. To examine the production of sociological knowledge and sensitize us to what it feels like to be studied one person has often volunteered to study the class itself.

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 singular 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 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 who have a monopoly of knowledge of their projects. In this course the teacher becomes ignorant as the students become the cognoscenti, educating each other. (See Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*).

6. Mid-Semester Literature Review

We will not only enter into a dialogue with those we study, and with our colleagues 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.

7. Final Paper

As must be clear the final paper is not born through 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 infatuation with your field site. When it comes to ethnography length is more vice than 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.