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Some Role Problems in Field Research

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The principal method that has been used by anthropologists and sociologists to conduct field research is participant observation. As Powdermaker remarks, this method:

was forged in the study of small homogenous societies, in which the anthropologists lived for an extended period of time, participated in them, learned the language, interviewed and constantly observed. (Powdermaker, 1966a, p. 285)

Meanwhile, sociologists have also utilised the method of participant observation as they have gone about studying small-scale situations in their own societies. Participant observation is not merely a method of conducting field research, but also a role that is used by the researcher. The task of the participant observer is well summarised by Becker, who states:

The participant observer gathers data by participating in the daily life of the group or organization he studies. He watches the people he is studying to see what situations they ordinarily meet and how they behave in them. He enters into conversation with some or all of the participants in these situations and discovers their interpretations of the events he has observed. (Becker, 1958, p. 652)

This supports the view that the main instrument of data collection is the researcher. Such a situation means that researchers who become participant observers have to develop certain qualities, if they are to learn about the people with whom they are involved.

The qualities that are demanded of participant observers flow naturally from Becker's definition. They need to share in the lives and activities of those whom they study and take roles which are effective in the setting under study. They need to learn the language that is used in the setting, to remember actions and speech and to gather data from a range of individuals in a range of social situations. In this respect, participant observers need to understand the skills that they require and the roles that they take in research settings. Chapters 7 and 8 in this section, by Frankenberg and by Gans, focus on the participant observer. Here, the authors draw on British and American material respectively to explore the personal qualities of the participant observer, the diverse roles that the participant observer is expected to play, the relationship between the researcher and the researched and the sources of anxiety involved in being a participant observer.

The literature on participant observation is vast and much of the material examines how participant observers should present themselves. An early contribution to this discussion by Schwartz and Schwartz (1955) indicates that the roles of the participant observer could be formal or informal, concealed or revealed. They argue that participant observation can be placed on a continuum, with 'passive' participant observation at one end of the continuum and 'active' participant observation at the other. The 'passive' participant observer role is an ideal type, in which the observer interacts as little as possible with the observed. Meanwhile, the 'active' participant observer role is another ideal type, where the participant observer maximises participation to gather data, while integrating with other individuals in the social setting. These ideal types have been extended into four 'master roles' in a discussion by Gold (1958), in which he distinguishes at either end of the continuum the complete participant role and the complete observer role. Meanwhile, between these extreme positions he is able to identify the participant-as-observer role and the observer-as-participant role.

The role of complete participant, Gold suggests, is used in situations where the researcher does not reveal the fact that research is being conducted. Here, the researcher may become a member of the group that is being studied. A classic example where this role was employed is in Festinger, Riecken and Schachter (1956), in which the researchers became members of a religious group. More recent studies of sectarian groups by Wallis (1976) and by Homan (1978) have used this approach, as has Humphreys (1970) in his study of homosexuals. It can be argued that this style of research overcomes the problem of gaining access to a group. Furthermore, it is maintained that groups whose behaviour might be influenced by the presence of a researcher can be studied in their natural setting. However, such arguments have to be placed against the objections that can be raised. First, if the people involved in a social situation are not aware that they are being researched, it makes it virtually impossible for the participant observer to pose questions to them. Secondly, the role that is taken puts the researcher in the position of being a spy (cf. Hughes, 1960). Thirdly, the role may mean that it is impossible for researchers to distinguish their everyday roles from their research roles with the result that they 'go native' and fail to pursue their research activities. Finally, it can be argued that even if participant observers can overcome role problems that confront them in the field, there are still unanswered questions about the ethics of reporting and publishing data that were gathered covertly.

Another 'master role' identified by Gold is that of the participant-as-observer. Here, the researcher and the researched are aware that their relationship stems from the research. Certainly, this role is advocated by Roy (1970) in his study of labour unions and is used in countless studies where the researcher participates with the informants and takes a particular role (for example, Hargreaves, 1967; Lacey, 1970). Here, both researcher and researched need to consider their relationships and the extent to which the researcher and the researched can overidentify with each other. In this respect, it is essential for the researcher to remain a 'stranger' while being involved in the situation under study (cf. Jarvie in Chapter 10).

The remaining 'master roles' are not so frequently used in field research. Gold discusses the role of observer-as-participant. Here, the observer role is made public from the start of the research. However, although there is less risk of 'going native' attached to this role, it is probably the least satisfactory in that the relationship established with

informants is very brief, so that little detailed data can be obtained. Finally, Gold identifies the complete observer role which entirely removes the researcher from interaction with informants. A similar approach to research has been used by King (1978) in his study of infants' classrooms, where he engaged in non-participant observation. He argues that he was able to 'effectively disappear' in the classroom by avoiding conversations or being engaged in activities with teachers and pupils. Such an approach comes very close to the situation that might exist when observations are made in a laboratory. It is a role that is rarely used in field research.

While the four 'master roles' are clearly distinguished by Gold, it is important to remember that they are ideal types, and that in the course of any piece of field research, all these social roles may be used. The result is that participant observers have to learn to take and play roles in essentially the same way as they play roles throughout life (cf. Cicourel, 1964). However, in the case of taking roles in field situations, participant observers have to be able not only to take and play roles, but also to evaluate them, to evaluate their relationships with their informants and the influence that their role performance may have on the data that they collect.

Participant observers have to consider how far they may influence the settings in which they work, how far their perceptions and analyses of the settings are influenced by the personal relationships that they form with their informants, how far their work should be secret, and how far their personal attributes (for instance, age, sex, dress, social class, speech and ethnicity) influence the research. In short, participant observers have to assess their involvement and detachment in social situations. These issues have been perceptively summarised in a question by Schwartz and Jacobs, who ask: 'how does a social scientist mesh himself into the world so that he finds out the things he is interested in while simultaneously avoiding the danger that his "enmeshment" will become a source of distorted information?' (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979, p. 52). The remainder of this chapter addresses some of these issues by focusing on the way in which participant observers engage in covert and overt research, the influence of their personal attributes and other aspects of their position on the research and the operationalisation of their roles in the society or aspect of society that is studied.

One of the basic issues which any participant observer has to confront is the choice between engaging in covert or overt research. In a recent discussion on covert methods of participant observation, Homan (1980) considers that this approach to doing field research is justified with particular groups such as the old-time Pentecostal group that he studied. Homan indicates that without the use of covert methods, this group would not have been accessible to study. Here, we might consider the question posed by Bulmer (1980) in a rejoinder: 'is secret observation justifiable or desirable?' Certainly, Homan maintains that secrecy is justifiable as it merely poses problems concerning personal and professional behaviour. Yet he argues that his clandestine activities were less disruptive than if he had gone openly into this field of study. In his rejoinder, Bulmer (1980) raises several objections to Homan's position. First, he argues that the principle of informed consent has been ignored. Secondly, he considers that Homan's position constitutes betrayal of trust and involves an invasion of personal privacy. However, Bulmer does not consider that covert methods should never be used, but that a decision to utilise such methods should be taken carefully.

Here, the participant observer might consider if a distinction can be made between covert and overt methods. Roth (1962b) maintains that a distinction between secret and non-secret research cannot be sustained, as he claims it is never possible to tell the researched 'everything'. Furthermore, he argues that there are public settings (for example, schools, hospitals, pubs and crowd situations) in which it is impossible for the researcher to indicate to all the participants that research is being conducted. In this respect, Roth considers that secrecy is something that has to be continually confronted in social research.

Meanwhile, some researchers (Whyte, 1955; Liebow, 1967; Olesen and Whittaker, 1967) indicate that research should be open and researchers and research activities should be made public. In these circumstances, it is argued that participant observers can move about, ask questions and structure their research. Polsky indicates that in some investigations, such as the study of criminal behaviour, it is vital for participant observers to let criminals know who they are, as he warns somewhat sharply:

in doing field research on criminals you damned well better *not* pretend to be 'one of them' because they will test this claim out and one of two things will happen: either you will...get sucked into 'participant' observation of the sort you would rather not undertake, or you will be exposed with still greater negative consequences. (Polsky, 1969, p. 122)

If participant observers have any doubts about the roles they take, their relationship with their informants and the way this can influence their research, they might carefully consider Polsky's warning which has applicability beyond the study of deviance.

A further area of concern for the participant observer is the extent to which personal characteristics will influence roles, relationships and data. One area that has been considered in some detail is the influence of sex and gender on field research (Golde, 1970; Warren and Rasmussen, 1977; Wax, 1979; Roberts, 1981 a). Much of this literature considers the position of women in field research. Easterday *et al.* (Chapter 9) look at the extent to which ascribed gender status and sexuality is a feature of participant observation and how it can influence the validity and reliability of field data.

In an analysis of anthropological research Golde indicates how it is important to systematically scrutinise 'how the chief instrument of research the anthropologist herself may alter that which is being studied and may be changed in turn' (Golde, 1970, p. 5). In particular, Golde indicates that specific behaviour is triggered off by women. She indicates that the stereotyped view of women, as vulnerable in terms of their relative weakness and openness to sexual attack, means that it is assumed by many informants that they require protection and greater assistance than men. The result, she maintains, is that women are given roles such as 'child', 'sister', or 'grandmother', that minimise their range of contacts to predominantly children and women (cf. Dua, 1979; Gupta, 1979). Furthermore, she argues that age and marital status can also influence the role to which a woman is assigned. In particular, she maintains that young, unmarried women are considered by their informants to be in need of protection. These aspects of ascribed role and status have been commented upon by Wax (1979). She illustrates from her field experience at Pine Ridge how separate studies had to be conducted with men and women, given the way in which particular activities were related to specific sexes. On the basis of

this experience, Wax concludes that the most effective research on a 'whole' culture can only be done by research teams that are mixed in terms of age and sex. Furthermore, she argues that given the problems that arise from the female stereotype for young women, it would appear that mature women have the greatest scope for doing field research as they are usually not provided with a protected role.

The problems that confront the young female fieldworker are discussed in more detail by Easterday *et al.* (Chapter 9). Further evidence on how masculinity and femininity influences field relations has been explored by Warren and Rasmussen (1977). They have also extended the discussion to examine the extent to which sex, defined by them as youthfulness and attractiveness, influences research relationships. Using Rasmussen's research on the nude beach (Douglas, Rasmussen and Flanagan, 1977) they indicate that Rasmussen (the male researcher) encountered difficulties in working with men, while Flanagan (the female researcher) encountered difficulties in working with women, with the result that joint work was considered more appropriate in this setting. In a further example from sex research, Warren indicates how she used her femaleness in working among gay males and suggests that being male or female is crucial in gaining access to data in such settings (cf. Humphreys, 1970). A further dimension to sex and gender in field research occurs when women are treated as sex objects which may result in different roles, situations and activities being presented to men and women, as some activities may be regarded as unsuitable for female observation (cf. Gupta's difficulties in studying a political situation, Gupta, 1979). Furthermore, as Golde (1970) suggests, women may be regarded with less suspicion than men due to the attributes associated with the female stereotype. In these circumstances, field researchers might consider the extent to which ascribed roles through age, sex and gender can provide or restrict access to field data when they take the role of participant observers.

Finally, a theme which recurs in the literature on participant observation is the relationship between the participant observer's outside role in society and inside role in the research setting. This has been summed up by Powdermaker, when she remarks:

To understand a strange society, the anthropologist has traditionally immersed himself in it, learning, as far as possible, to think, see, feel, and sometimes act as a member of its culture and at the same time as a trained anthropologist from another culture. This is the heart of the participant observation method—involvement and detachment. (Powdermaker, 1966a, p. 9)

This dual role of outsider and insider gives the participant observer greater opportunity of being able to 'step in and out' of the setting under study; to participate and to reflect on the data that is gathered during participation. Indeed, Trice (1956) has argued that this dual role is exceedingly valuable for data collection, as the outsider role may help prevent the individual from being overidentified with the group that is being studied. It may help in preventing problems of overrapport (Miller, 1952) and assist in data collection. However, this question of the relationship between taking the role of outsider and insider, the role of stranger and of friend, is considered by Jarvie when he argues that participant observation involves a clash of roles. Jarvie considers that the participant observer is caught in an ethical dilemma which, he maintains, can only be resolved by taking the

stranger role. Such a dilemma confronts every participant observer, and indicates the complexity of the task that is involved in taking field roles in order to gather data.

Suggestions for Further Reading

METHODOLOGY

There is a vast literature on participant observation. The material suggested here has been selected for its relevance to the issues discussed:

- Bulmer, M. (1982) (ed.), *Social Research Ethics* (London: Macmillan); contains papers that review some of the main ethical issues in doing participant observation.
- Filstead, W.J. (1970) (ed.), *Qualitative Methodology: Firsthand Involvement with the Social World* (Chicago: Markham); this is a collection of predominantly American papers on issues relating to participant observation. See especially parts 2 and 3 that include discussions of field roles, and part 6 on ethics.
- Golde, P. (1970) (ed.), *Women in the Field: Anthropological Experiences* (Chicago: Aldine); consists of anthropological accounts that demonstrate the influence of sex and gender on field research.
- Homan, R. (1980), 'The ethics of covert methods', *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 46–59; attempts to justify the use of covert methods. See the critical rejoinder by Bulmer (1980) in the same issue.
- McCall, G.J. and Simmons, J.L. (1969) (eds), *Issues in Participant Observation: a Text and Reader* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley); this is another collection of American papers on participant observation. There is considerable overlap with the papers in Filstead (1970).
- Olesen, V.L. and Whittaker, E.W. (1967), 'Role-making in participant observation: processes in the research-actor relationship', *Human Organization*, vol. 26, no. 4, pp. 273–81; discusses the relationship between researcher and researched and role development.
- Polsky, N. (1969), *Hustlers, Beats and Others* (Harmondsworth: Penguin); contains a useful chapter entitled 'Research method, morality and criminology' that raises important principles involved in doing participant observation together with useful warnings and some advice.
- Powdermaker, H. (1966), *Stranger and Friend: the Way of An Anthropologist* (New York: Norton); has an introduction and epilogue that provide a good commentary on questions of involvement and detachment in participant observation; the book is based on the author's experiences of doing research.
- Roberts, H. (1981) (ed.), *Doing Feminist Research* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul); discusses the influence of feminism and feminist methodology on research (see especially the papers by Roberts, 1981b; Oakley, 1981; Pettigrew, 1981; and Morgan, 1981).
- Warren, C.A.B. and Rasmussen, P.K. (1977), 'Sex and gender in field research', *Urban Life*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 349–69; this is a useful discussion of sex and gender by sociologists who have engaged in participant observation.

EMPIRICAL STUDIES

There are a vast number of studies that utilise participant observation for data collection. I have selected some of the studies that I consider are most useful, interesting and entertaining. The list is divided into British and American studies:

British studies

- Bell, C. (1968), *Middle Class Families* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- Cohen, S. and Taylor, L. (1972), *Psychological Survival: the Experience of Long Term Imprisonment* Harmondsworth: Penguin).
- Cunnison, S. (1966), *Wages and Work Allocation* (London: Tavistock).
- Davis, A. and Horobin, G. (1977) (eds), *Medical Encounters: the experience of Illness and Treatment* (London: Croom-Helm); see especially the essays by Atkinson (1977) and by MacIntyre and Oldman (1977).
- Ditton, J. (1977), *Part-Time Crime: an Ethnography of Fiddling and Pilferage* (London: Macmillan).
- Frankenberg, R. (1957), *Village on the Border* (London: Cohen & West).
- Hargreaves, D.H. (1967), *Social Relations in a Secondary School* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- King, R. (1978), *All Things Bright and Beautiful? A Sociological Study of Infants' Classrooms* (Chichester: Wiley).
- Lacey, C. (1970), *Hightown Grammar: the School as a Social System* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press).
- Littlejohn, J. (1963), *Westrigg* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- Lupton, T. (1963), *On The Shop Floor* (Oxford: Pergamon).
- Nash, R. (1973), *Classrooms Observed* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- Parker, H. (1974), *View from the Boys* Newton Abbot: David & Charles).
- Patrick, J. (1973), *A Glasgow Gang Observed* (London: Eyre-Methuen).
- Stacey, M., Batstone, E., Bell, C. and Murcott, A. (1975), *Power, Persistence and Change: a Second Study of Banbury* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- Wallis, R. (1976), *The Road to Total Freedom: a Sociological Analysis of Scientology* (London: Heinemann).
- Williams, W.M. (1956), *The Sociology of an English Village: Gosforth* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- Woods, P. (1979), *The Divided School* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).

American Studies

- Becker, H.S., Geer, B., Hughes, E.C. and Strauss, A.L. (1961), *Boys in White: Student Culture in Medical School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Becker, H.S., Geer, B. and Hughes, E.C. (1968), *Making the Grade* (New York: Wiley).
- Festinger, L., Riecken, H.W. and Schachter, S. (1956), *When Prophecy Fails* (New York: Harper & Row).
- Gans, H.J. (1962), *The Urban Villagers* (New York: The Free Press).
- Gans, H.J. (1967), *The Levittowners* (London: Allen Lane).
- Humphreys, L. (1970), *Tearoom Trade* (London: Duckworth).
- Jacobs, J. (1974), *Fun City: an Ethnographic Study of a Retirement Community* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston).
- Liebow, E. (1967), *Tally's Corner: a Study of Negro Street Corner Men* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown).
- Roth, J.A. (1963), *Timetables* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill).
- Spradley, J.P. and Mann, B.J. (1975), *The Cocktail Waitress* (New York: Wiley).
- Strauss, A.L., Schatzman, L., Bucher, R., Ehrlich, D. and Sabshin, M. (1964), *Psychiatric Ideologies and Institutions* (New York: The Free Press).
- Whyte, W.F. (1955), *Street Corner Society* (2nd edn) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).