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From Chapter 7:  
Observation and Ethnography

Pages 204-219

### The Relationship between Observer and Observed

Weick (1968) and other sources in the more quantitative traditions (e.g., Babbie 1989; Judd, Smith, & Kidder 1991) suggest that a major element differentiating observational studies is the nature of the relationship between the observer and the observed. The continuum of roles that is envisioned, attributed variously to Gold (1958) and Junker (1960), can range from the **complete participant** to the **complete observer**, as depicted in Figure 7.2. We'll examine the two extremes of the continuum first, and then try to make some sense of the middle ground.

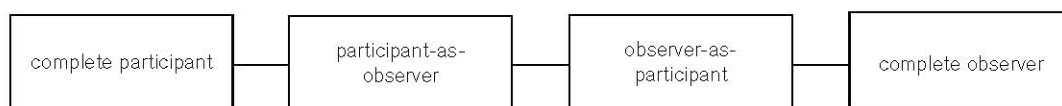
#### THE COMPLETE PARTICIPANT

With the “complete participant” role, the observer does not reveal himself or herself as a researcher. From the perspective of those being observed, the researcher *is* a participant. There are two ways this might occur.

**THE POST HOC OBSERVER** In the first, the observer *really is* a participant, with any efforts at “observation,” in its empirical sense, done on a *post hoc* (a Latin phrase meaning “after the fact”) basis. That is, someone who has been a participant in some social situation decides to write about it after his or her participation ends. Examples would include a politician who decides to write his or her memoirs after retirement; anyone sitting down at

**Figure 7.2**

The Traditional Observational Continuum: “Complete Participant” to “Complete Observer”



the end of the day to make a diary entry; or someone who has been a prisoner, a sex worker, or the head of a major corporation writing after the fact about his or her experiences. The defining aspect here is that as the process occurs, the person *is* a participant; only after the fact does s/he decide to reflect on his or her experiences and write an analytical account based on earlier observations.

This *post hoc* development of accounts has both advantages and limitations. Accounts produced by former participants can be very analytical and insightful; the information they provide often has all the immediacy, intimacy, and insight that can only come from direct involvement. Besides the interesting perspective these accounts represent in their own right, the heuristic benefit of providing them as raw data for subsequent analysis should also not be overlooked.

But the limitations to the “*post hoc* observer” role are several. First, ethical issues are raised by a transition from “complete participant” to later “writer/analyst,” since the “informed consent” provisions of ethical guidelines are clearly violated. Second, it’s virtually a research truism that to minimize reporting bias and distortion in data gathering, the researcher should be prepared to systematically gather relevant evidence while the observation is in process. Observation as a social science research method requires preparation, attention to detail, and the systematic retention of notes. Because of the *post hoc* observer’s after-the-fact change in role, his or her accounts are more likely to be subject to errors of memory or selective recollection of events (since he or she was busy participating at the time).

One also must consider the motives of those who adopt an observer role after the fact. Do they have a particular axe to grind or image to convey? It will surely be reflected in their accounts. “Complete participants” who wish to make the transition to “writer/analyst” should be particularly sensitive to the need for independent corroboration of their accounts (e.g., by compiling memos, tapes, or other documentation; interviewing other participants; compiling media accounts); such evidence may also help to jog one’s memory or fill in gaps.

**THE SURREPTITIOUS OBSERVER** The second way to adopt the “complete participant” role involves the researcher entering a situation fully intending to engage in observational research, but doing so without ever telling those being observed what he or she is doing. Laud Humphreys’s (1970) *Tearoom Trade*, noted in Chapter 3, would fall into this group. Another example is the classic study entitled *When Prophecy Fails*, by Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (1956).

But as with the *post hoc* observer, the lack of informed consent and the presence of deception should wave red flags for you in the realm of ethical concerns. Key factors to consider here are (a) whether the situation is “public” or not, and (b) whether the data that are gathered involve identifiable persons. For example, few people have any problem with the idea of doing observational research on the way that people use public spaces such as waiting rooms, elevators, shopping malls, and parking lots. One can easily imagine other examples: examining crowd behaviour while attending a sporting event or music concert; spending time in courtrooms watching interactions among lawyers, judges, and court staff. In each case, the researcher participates as just another member of the crowd; the process of observing such behaviour doesn’t seem like a violation of privacy, since one is examining only those actions people decide to reveal in public anyway. Further, because there’s rarely any attempt to acquire people’s names in this sort of setting, anonymity is preserved. In most such cases the people are not identified and cannot be after the study is over.

But what if the researcher wants to videotape the way people spontaneously order themselves as they enter buses or get on escalators. Some would be concerned about consent issues here because of the possibility of identifiability; others would have no problem with it as long as the only people who see the tapes are members of the research team so that confidentiality is preserved.

Also, we have glossed over any difficulties with separating “public” from “private” spaces, but is the line always so easily drawn? What about meetings of

Alcoholics Anonymous? They are open to anyone who wants to attend, but is the “open” invitation not implicitly limited to those with a drinking problem who want to seek help? Can the “open” invitation also be exploited by researchers, journalists, and so on? Lofland and Lejeune (1960) did exactly that in their study of AA and were chastised by some and praised by others when they published their work.

Similar questions are asked about cyber opportunities such as chat rooms, some of which are completely open; others require “memberships” that are simply a matter of registering, while others are more surreptitious and closed (see Atchison 1999 and Kitchin 2002 for discussions about these issues as they pertain to cyber-research). Is it acceptable for researchers to “lurk” in such cybersettings in order to observe the interaction and then to write about it without the consent of those involved? In the past one might have argued that the provision of confidentiality made surreptitious observation acceptable, but we have to be careful when we quote someone “anonymously” because powerful search engines such as Google now make it quite plausible that today’s “anonymous” quote will be quite easily attached to a person via some cyber-group’s electronic archive.

Social scientists continue to be divided about the wisdom of doing surreptitious research, as they have been for years. Some maintain that deception is never acceptable. Others argue that such an approach is reasonable as long as (1) the research question is of sufficient merit; (2) those being observed are not adversely affected or diverted by one’s presence; and (3) appropriate precautions are taken to ensure confidentiality. Still others suggest that even those restrictions are too cumbersome and that when observational research is designed to expose and analyze abuses of power and other corruptive practices, anything goes (e.g., see Punch 1994 for a discussion of that perspective and Miller & Tewksbury 2001 for a broader discussion about the utility and ethics of covert methods). Perhaps intending to steer a midcourse, others have gathered data as “complete participants” but have then sought “informed consent” after the fact by informing those

involved of their motives and asking whether they might be permitted to use the data (e.g., Alfred 1976).

Finally, it has also been argued that from a purely scientific perspective, the “surreptitious observer” role cannot be dismissed, since it combines the dual advantages of being an observer (and hence being prepared, systematic, etc.) while also minimizing the reactivity of participants through the shared participant role.

When a decision is made to engage in surreptitious observation, other issues arise. For example, assuming a strictly participatory identity in the setting, while still maintaining your observational motives, requires you to assume multiple roles, a situation that can create role conflict (e.g., see Cicourel 1964; Marquart 2001; Riecken 1969). The problems are twofold. First, because (by definition) the “real” participants can’t know that you’re an observer, you can’t take notes while observing. As a result, you must either make numerous trips to the bathroom in order to jot down notes or write down a choice quotation, or wait until the end of the day to write daily synopses. In the former case, if not perceived as having a bladder problem, you may be viewed suspiciously. In the latter case, the longer the delay between when you make your observations and when you actually write them down, the greater heed you must pay to distortions of recall or the bias of selective memory. Cicourel (1964) argues that such distortions represent one of the biggest problems in research involving the complete participant.

A second problem arises from the fact that, in order to continue the participant guise, you must *participate*. But by doing so, you potentially alter the very process you are trying to observe. When Festinger’s graduate students joined a doomsday group in order to study them, it’s possible that the mere act of their joining helped convince the original group members of the veracity of their vision. And once you’ve joined, what do you do when someone turns to you during discussion and asks, “So what do *you* think?” If you say something and people follow your suggestion, you may have influenced the group to go

in a direction it might not otherwise have gone. If you say something and your suggestion is *not* followed, this sequence of events might be the beginning of disharmony or factionalism within the group. But if you *don't* say anything, you may engender suspicion about your presence or contribute to feelings of indecisiveness or ambiguity among members of the group. In sum, it's hard to know how to be "neutral"; this is one instance where politicians, many of whom seem quite expert at sounding like they're responding to a question while really saying nothing, may provide a useful model.

Finally, it should also be noted that there are many other settings where ethical concerns do not seem as problematic, even though participants in the research are never told that they have participated in a piece of research. Lyn H. Lofland (e.g., 1973), for example, has spent a considerable amount of time sitting in bus depots and other public places observing the way strangers use space in public settings. And John Lowman (1989), as part of his study evaluating the effects of changes in the "communicating" laws regarding prostitution, included simple counts of the numbers of prostitutes who could be observed working the streets both before and after the change in the law.

### THE COMPLETE OBSERVER

At the other extreme of the continuum is the "complete observer" role. This position is epitomized by the researcher who identifies himself or herself as being engaged in observational research, and who either sets up a study in his or her own setting (such as a laboratory or clinic) or gains access to another setting (such as an organization or group) by seeking and obtaining the permission of someone appropriate. Once in the setting, the complete observer typically does his or her best to remain relatively inconspicuous, doing nothing other than observe with the full knowledge of all who are present that that's why the researcher is there.

**OBSERVING ON HOME TURF** There's an extensive tradition of observational research in the laboratory, particularly among experimental social psy-

chologists and those who study child development. Such studies typically involve setting up a particular situation, with the observer then retreating behind a one-way glass to make notes or systematically code the behaviours that emerge. This method was particularly popular in the "group dynamics" domain, for example, where researchers would test theories about the dynamics of groups under varying conditions. There are two great advantages to this approach. First, it's ethically non-problematic (assuming participants aren't misled about the purpose of the research), because participants are informed from the start that they're participating in an observational study. Second, because it happens on the researcher's own turf in a predetermined manner, he or she is ready to observe, using checklists or other coding schemes that have been prepared ahead of time.

The biggest *disadvantages* associated with such research are the often artificial and decontextualized nature of the setting (if, indeed, any setting can be said to "lack" context), and the reactivity that's often involved when research participants know they're being observed. The artificial nature of such settings means that while they may be reasonable research sites for testing theoretical propositions (i.e., hypothesis testing)—since such testing requires only a setting in which the scope conditions designated by the theory are met—one must be cautious about generalizing one's results to other settings where different contextual conditions hold. And reactivity remains a problem no matter what one's research objectives are.

**THE COMPLETE OBSERVER IN THE FIELD** Besides considerations of reactivity, the complete observer in the field must first deal with problems of access. You must address the question of why any group or organization should let you—a stranger—observe its behaviour. Although we might like or hope for the prospective participants to trust us immediately because we are affiliated with a university and/or have a project due next month and/or are basically honest and well-meaning, reality is rarely so benevolent. Instead, the complete observer must be prepared to talk his or her way into the group.

Lofland and Lofland (1984) suggest that you'll be most effective in doing so if you come armed with connections, accounts, knowledge, and courtesy.

With respect to *connections*, Lofland and Lofland (1984) suggest that, if you're not connected with the target group or organization already, you'd do well to cast about among your friends and acquaintances to find someone who is and who would be willing to provide an introduction. They recount the experiences of Joan Hoffman (1980), who was herself a member of an elite family and who had attempted to talk to community elites who were serving on hospital boards:

Introducing myself as a sociology graduate student, I had very limited success in getting by the gatekeepers of the executive world. Telephone follow-ups to letters sent requesting an interview repeatedly found Mr. X "tied up" or "in conference." When I did manage to get my foot in the door, interviews rarely exceeded a half hour, were continuously interrupted by phone calls ... and elicited only "front work" ... the public version of what hospital boards were all about ... By chance during [one] interview, my respondent discovered that he knew a member of my family. "Why didn't you say so?" The rest of the interview was dramatically different than all my previous data. (Hoffman 1980: 46; cited in Lofland & Lofland 1984: 25)

Even when you know no one in the setting, connecting with one person who can act as an "in" and/or "key informant" can make all the difference between getting a project off the ground and not. For Whyte (1943), in his classic *Street Corner Society*, for example, the person who made all the difference was "Doc." For Duneier (1999) in his study of sidewalk entrepreneurs in *Sidewalk*, it was seller of "black books" Hakim Hasan, with whom he struck up a conversation when he noticed Hasan was selling a book Duneier had written previously. For Horowitz (1983), the beginning came with a mixture of persistence and luck:

I chose to sit on a park bench where many youths gathered from noon until midnight. On the third afternoon of sitting on the bench, as I dropped a softball that had rolled toward me, a young man came over and said "You can't catch" (which I acknowledged) and "You're not from the hood [neighbourhood], are you?" This was a statement, not a question. He was Gilberto, the Lions' President. When I told him I wanted to write a book on Chicano youth, he said I should meet the other young men and took me over to shake hands with eight members of the Lions. (7; cited in Berg 2001: 146)

Once a preliminary connection is made, Lofland and Lofland (1984) argue that you should also be prepared with *accounts*, by which they mean "a carefully thought-out explanation or account of the proposed research" (25). Use words and concepts that are meaningful to the prospective sample, and while you should be prepared to offer an academic justification for your project, that's probably not what's being sought here. Instead, you should be ready to offer a simple, straightforward, and honest explanation that addresses the question "Why are you interested in us?"

Ironically, Lofland and Lofland introduce "being knowledgeable" as a liability, though at times it can also be an asset, depending on the situation. A commonly used strategy is to represent yourself as a "learner," which, indeed, in some ways, you are (otherwise, there'd be no need to engage in the research). The advantages of taking that approach are twofold. First, it reduces the extent to which you might be perceived as threatening. Second, the process of "teaching" reveals much about a person's understandings.

But the role of "naïve observer" can also be overplayed and can end up interfering with the acquisition of rich data. If you're perceived as unknowledgeable, you're likely to receive little more than what Hoffman (1980) referred to above as "front work," that is, superficial information of the type that usually appears in brochures or on guided

tours. Particularly when people are very busy and/or are more senior members of the organization, you must demonstrate that you're worth their time and that they, in particular, are the only appropriate sources for what you need to know. Showing that you've done your homework, that you don't ask the same simple questions that everyone else asks, that you can speak "the language" of that profession, and that you know something about the phenomenon you wish to observe (but do not have too many preconceived notions and are willing to watch and listen) is a good recipe for being treated seriously.

Finally, Lofland and Lofland (1984) emphasize that you must show *courtesy* and respect in negotiating for entry. This means phoning ahead to make appointments at a time convenient to your guide(s); taking the time to tell everyone who's interested a little bit about your research, even if a given person isn't directly involved; and ensuring that you also get permission from dependent or subordinate populations as well as from those who act as gatekeepers (e.g., asking the kids for their permission and not just their parents and the daycare person).

**MIXING PARTICIPATION AND OBSERVATION** The two middle roles in the observational continuum are labelled **participant-as-observer** and **observer-as-participant**. As their titles suggest, both involve a mixing of the participatory and observational roles, with the difference based on which of the two predominates. This in itself may not be particularly clear-cut, and participant observers often float back and forth between the two, depending on the particular situation.

One perfect example of a mixture of roles was chosen by Muzafer Sherif in his famous "Robber's Cave" studies (see Sherif et al. 1961). Sherif was interested in studying group dynamics, particularly with respect to group formation, cohesiveness, and conflict, and used a boys' summer camp as the context in which to perform his research. As far as the boys were concerned, it was summer camp and nothing more. But for Sherif, it was also an opportunity to manipulate different aspects of the situa-

tion (e.g., setting up teams, facilitating the development of rivalries, setting up a situation where only through cooperation could an obstacle be overcome) to systematically investigate their effects. Everything that happened involved typical summer camp experiences; Sherif's interest was in making things happen at particular times rather than leaving them to chance.

The ideal from Sherif's perspective was to be a participant—to avoid reactivity effects and to be close to the centre of the action—while at the same time remaining detached from the action so that he didn't inadvertently influence it. If you were Muzafer Sherif, what role would *you* occupy in order to ensure that you didn't interfere unintentionally in the course of events? He obviously couldn't pretend to be one of the boys. He might have chosen to be a camp counsellor, but then might have become a special focus of attention for the kids. The brilliance of Muzafer Sherif is revealed in that, even if you were at the camp, you would probably have looked right past him. He was the janitor and part-time maintenance person, one of those invisible service people who are always there but in some way socially nonexistent or outside the action, perhaps raking leaves or picking up litter. His presence would likely go unnoticed.

In many ways, mixing the participant and observer roles surmounts the problems of each role in isolation. To the extent that the researcher's status as an observer is honestly presented, ethical concerns about deception or lack of informed consent are minimized. And to the extent that the researcher acts as a participant in the setting, reactivity is often reduced because, as a participant, he or she more quickly fades into the group.

### **MORE QUALITATIVE METHODS: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND ETHNOGRAPHY**

We now begin crossing the border to methods favoured by more qualitatively oriented researchers. Participant observation (a tradition in sociology)

and ethnography (rooted in anthropology) are often used to try to get into the phenomenological world of the “other,” that is, coming to *know* people who are different from one’s “self.” J. Lofland (1971) suggests that it’s more characteristic in modern life for us to *know about* people and things than to *know* them:

A significant feature of being a modern person—of living in what we call the modern world—is to *know about* a wide variety of other human beings but not to *know* them. To know about a category of human beings is to have it represented by second parties that such a category exists. We can know about Hottentots, Russians, presidents, delinquents, hippies, or whatever through newspapers, television, face-to-face reports, and other *mediated* means. (1)

But, adds J. Lofland (1971), “to know about—is to know through stereotype and typification—is not enough. We want a more direct sense of what other people are about and what their lives are like than that provided by casual and unexamined typifications” (2).

The difference between “knowing about” and “knowing” is the difference between casual curiosity and the more systematic, strategic interest of social scientists. By arguing for direct contact, Lofland reaffirms that part of being a social scientist is to *interact* with the phenomena we wish to understand; as G. Morgan (1983b) phrased it, we “engage” them. We seek *direct* evidence from the world that bears on the theoretical issues that we deem—or that emerge as—important, and observation is a way to gather such data.

J. Lofland (1971) suggests that *knowing* requires the social scientist to be close to the people being studied in four respects:

(1) He should have been close in the physical sense of conducting his own life in face-to-face proximity to the persons he tells about; (2) This physical proximity should have extended over some significant period of time and variety of cir-

cumstances; (3) The [researcher]<sup>1</sup> should have developed closeness in the social sense of intimacy and confidentiality. He should have developed relationships that provided him reasonable access to the activities of a set of people through their entire round of life; (4) He should have conducted his recording activities in such a way that his reportage can give close and searching attention to ... the minutiae of daily life. (3)

Not all researchers would agree with Lofland. While Lofland’s distinction between *knowing about* and *knowing* may be useful in reminding us of the limitations of what we think we know, many would question whether it’s ever *really* possible to know (in the most profound sense) without having lived the life one aspires to understand. Can a non-Aboriginal person ever *really* understand what it’s like to grow up as an Aboriginal person in Canada? Can a physically healthy person ever *fully* appreciate the life of the physically challenged? Certainly there are aspects of the experience about which we can gather information, but perceptions and understandings founded on a lifetime of experience are very hard to capture in even the most extensive research program. But to the extent that we *can* understand those others, Lofland’s admonitions seem a reasonable set of criteria to adhere to, and they can be well met with participant observational and ethnographic methods.

## QUALITATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY

Both participant observation and ethnography refer to methods whereby the researcher spends extensive time (e.g., months or years) in a setting trying to understand some aspect(s) of the setting from the perspective of those in it, often using a combination of methods (e.g., observation might be supplemented with interviews and archival analysis). But at another level, ethnography is so completely different in its history and in the way it’s construed that it merits separate attention for the issues that have arisen in its development. By way of background, Vidich and Lyman (1994) explain that

*ethnos*, a Greek term, denotes a people, a race or cultural group ... When *ethnos* as a prefix is combined with *graphic* to form the term *ethnographic*, the reference is to the subdiscipline known as descriptive anthropology—in its broadest sense, the science devoted to describing ways of life of humankind. *Ethnography*, then, refers to a social scientific description of a people and the cultural basis of their peoplehood. (25; italics in original)

### The Challenge of Understanding an “Other”

The history of ethnography conveys much about the history of social science and its attempts to grapple with the understanding of an “other,” that is, someone other than ourselves. Vidich and Lyman suggest that ethnography grew out of Europeans’ interest in understanding the “primitive” cultures they encountered when Columbus stumbled across the “New World.”<sup>2</sup> Trying to understand someone so completely different from oneself poses a very big problem. As Vidich and Lyman (1994) phrased it,

in practice, it becomes this question: By which values are observations to be guided? The choices seem to be either the values of the ethnographer or the values of the observed—that is, in modern parlance, either the *etic* or the *emic* ... Herein lies a deeper and more fundamental problem: How is it possible to understand the other when the other’s values are not one’s own? (26)

#### THE EARLY ETHNOGRAPHER

Good question! Early cultural ethnographies (in the 15th and 16th centuries) by Europeans were done from a clearly European perspective, and evaluated indigenous practices and beliefs using a European yardstick. Most of these written accounts were produced by explorers, missionaries, and colonial administrators. Not surprisingly, when the implicit question was “how European” indigenous cultures were, the answer was “not very.” Since the Europeans of that time saw themselves and their Christian religions as the epitome of “civilization,” indigenous peoples were regarded as inferior, thereby

giving justification to the incredible greed and horrific treatment many of these “civilized” visitors exhibited toward their hosts (e.g., see Berger 1992; Churchill 1994; Wright 1992).

The beginnings of “modern” ethnography are typically said to have emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when anthropologists like Bronislaw Malinowski (e.g., see 1922) and Margaret Mead (e.g., see 1928/1960) actually left their homes and went travelling to see firsthand how these “others” lived.

The field-worker, during this period, was lionized, made into a larger-than-life figure who went into and then returned from the field with stories about strange people. Rosaldo (1989) describes this as the period of the Lone Ethnographer, the story of the man–scientist who went off in search of his native in a distant land ... Returning home with his data, the Lone Ethnographer wrote up an objective account of the culture he studied. (Denzin & Lincoln 1994: 7)

Once again, the criteria for analysis were clear. The application of Darwinian evolutionary theory to social matters—an approach that placed humans at the top of the natural order and was conveniently adapted to place Caucasians at the top of the human order—allowed any concerns about social relativism to be easily placed aside. If “we” were the top of the human heap, then surely “ours” were the most appropriate criteria to be used in understanding and evaluating other cultures. Thus, “objectivity” meant employing European standards and imposing a European point of view. The scholar’s challenge was to translate indigenous beliefs and practices into terms that Europeans could understand.<sup>3</sup> But when taken out of context that way, practices that might have played an important social role in indigenous cultures for thousands of years could appear quaint, trivial, and trite, if not completely beyond “rational” belief. The result made some people wonder how contemporary North Americans might appear if they were studied and written about in the same manner (e.g., see Miner 1956).

**DISCOVERING THE “OTHER” AMONG US**

The next “moment” of ethnographic history (to use Denzin & Lincoln’s [1994] term) featured a number of American sociologists who began to practise a similar method to understand the “other” that existed at home. Although there were other isolated examples of this “urban ethnography,” it was at the University of Chicago’s sociology department in the 1920s through the 1940s (the “Chicago School”) where this approach was practised with zeal. The names Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, W. I. Thomas, and Louis Wirth are prominent in such accounts. Central to their approach was the idea that American cities are brimming with heterogeneous peoples of differing lifestyles and worldviews, and that an understanding of American culture requires some understanding of that diversity. Park was the one to conceive of the “natural area” as the appropriate unit to be studied:

Every American city has its slums; its ghettos; its immigrant colonies, regions which maintain more or less alien and exotic cultures. Nearly every city has its bohemias and hobohemias, where life is freer, more adventurous and lonely than it is elsewhere. These are called natural areas of the city. (Park 1952: 196; cited in Vidich & Lyman 1994: 33)

Park encouraged sociologists to undertake case studies of these natural areas. And he, along with his colleagues and students, did so *en masse* for more than three decades. Studies were undertaken of “the Jewish ghetto, Polonia, Little Italy, Little Germany, Chinatown, Bronzeville and Harlem, the gold coast and the slum, hobo jungles, single-room occupants of furnished rooms, enclaves of cultural and social dissidents, the urban ecology of gangdom, and the urban areas that housed the suicidal, the drug addicted and the mentally disabled, and on the social and economic dynamics of real estate transactions,” to name only a few areas (Vidich & Lyman 1994: 33).<sup>4</sup> It was in keeping with this tradition that William Foote Whyte actually moved into an Italian-American neighbourhood to engage in research he called “participant observation” (see 1943).

Despite the differences between these two earlier moments of ethnographic history, they also shared a certain similarity. Underlying both was a sense of social scientific mission born from a kind of Euro-American imperialism that romanticized the “others” they scrutinized, while at the same time seeing their eventual passing as tragic, but inevitable, in the march of “progress” and assimilation. For anthropologists like Malinowski, the study of indigenous peoples was important primarily because it was a way to have a last brief glimpse of our own prehistory before it became ensnared by the inevitable onslaught of “progress” and “civilization” and faded into oblivion. For sociologists like Park, however much hobos or immigrants were lauded and romanticized, one senses the belief that the urban ethnographers’ texts would ultimately stand as museum pieces once all lost their uniqueness in the “melting pot” that was America. This attitude calls to mind the Borg, an alien culture featured on the former TV series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, whose slogan was “Resistance is futile; assimilation is inevitable.”<sup>5</sup>

But assimilation, it turned out, was not at all inevitable. Although challenges to theories that touted its inevitability were first raised in the 1930s (even by Park himself), a third moment of ethnographic history laid these views to rest. Vidich and Lyman (1994) describe the process: “During the two decades after 1970, ethnological studies of African-American, Amerindian, Mexican-American, and Asian peoples also cast considerable doubt on whether, when, and to whose benefit the much-vaunted process of ethnocultural meltdown in America would occur” (37). Other studies would attempt to give a voice to other of society’s underclasses, while also attempting to bring new levels of rigour to the process of qualitative analysis (e.g., see Becker 1958, 1963, 1979; Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss 1961; see also Kidder 1981a; Smith & Manning 1982).

**ISSUES OF “VOICE” AND “PRIVILEGE”**

The issue in many ways became an issue of *voice*: minority ethnic and racial groups became tired of other people speaking for them. All had felt the

injustice that the supposedly “neutral” sciences had imposed on them either by denying their voice entirely or, on those occasions when they were given one, by reinterpreting what they were trying to say. And while all were interested in participating in the contemporary world, all were also unwilling to leave behind their hyphenated identities as the price of admission. We saw the same theme evident in Chapter 6 with respect to feminist perspectives and the need to rectify the gender imbalance of written history.

Because of these concerns, many ethnographic researchers have great problems with the role continuum presented above under “Quantitative Observation,” the one that runs from the “complete participant” through a mixture of roles to the “complete observer” (recall Figure 7.2). That continuum implies that one *can* be a “complete observer” devoid of any participatory interest. But as Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) point out,

although it is important to recognize the variation to be found in the roles adopted by observers, this simple dichotomy is not very useful, not least because it seems to imply that the nonparticipant observer plays no recognized role at all ... In a sense *all* social research is a form of participant observation, because we cannot study the social world without being part of it. (248–49; see also Hammersley & Atkinson 1983)

This statement reflects the growing recognition that we cannot study the world without acknowledging the “we” that is doing the studying. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994) remind us, “any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity. There are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of the observer and the observed” (12). Our collective and individual biographies—whether because of the experience or the *lack* of experience (and hence perspective) they entail—cannot help but enter into and influence our work. Left at that, the challenge becomes one of trying to understand the role that biography might

play in our work, and either make an effort to counteract it or simply be upfront about its existence and let the reader decide what to make of it.

But the problem becomes magnified when we consider the power relations that have traditionally existed whenever we carry out a piece of research. We may try to be thoughtful about how we consider the research participant(s) we’re observing and may do our best to listen to them carefully as they tell us about their world; at the end of the day, though, it’s typically we alone who take the data home and “make sense” of it. The power of the text is ours:

Many voices clamor for expression. Poly-vocality was orchestrated and restrained in traditional ethnographies by giving to one voice [that of the researcher] a pervasive authorial function and to others the role of sources, “informants” to be quoted or paraphrased. (Clifford 1986: 15)

Much attention has been paid in the ethnographic literature to this relationship between “self” (the observer) and “other” (the observed). bell hooks (1989) captures the attitude well:

Often this speech about the “Other” annihilates, erases: “no need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me ... your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still the colonizer, the speak subject, and you are now at the center of my talk.” Stop. (70)

The concept around which much of the debate has centred is that of “privilege,” a term that refers to the control that being the researcher gives over the content and form of the final text (for example, the book or article that emerges from a piece of research).<sup>6</sup> The very nature of the research and publication process gives us the last word. Recognizing that fact reminds us of the weighty responsibility and ethical obligations that being a researcher entails.

People entrust their views to us, and part of our moral obligation is to ensure that they are treated with respect, fairness, and a sense of justice. Indeed, many would argue that part of the academic mission is to facilitate our own obsolescence by helping create the social conditions in which people generally, and the disadvantaged in particular, can speak for themselves.

This does *not* mean we should avoid doing research with people who are different from ourselves, for example, that men should never do research about women or that non-Aboriginal people should never do research involving Aboriginal people. Nor does it mean we should systematically avoid engaging in interpretation because doing so is somehow inherently an act of academic imperialism. Michelle Fine (1994) argues that this would be tantamount to witnessing injustice without expressing outrage. The trick is to ensure that, when we *do* engage in such research, we are especially sensitive to issues of voice, going out of our way to make the research a collaborative enterprise, seeking input at all stages from those who will be most affected and whose perspectives we seek to represent. As Fine (1994) suggests,

Those of us who do this work need to invent communities of friendly critical informants who can help us think through whose voices and analyses to front, and whose to foreground. (80)

Thus, for example, a non-Aboriginal social scientist should be able to do research dealing with Aboriginal issues—indeed, *not* doing research on so important a topic seems a tacit acceptance of injustice<sup>7</sup>—but the person who does so without seeking diverse and critical Aboriginal input at every stage of the process, from the design and conception of research to the final act of writing and interpretation, risks a myopic and potentially hurtful result (see also Smith 1999).

## HOW AND WHAT DO YOU OBSERVE?

The sections above on quantitative and qualitative approaches to observation research urge us to con-

sider both the research role we occupy and the nature of the relationship that exists—or that we create—both between us as researchers and those we observe. Unless we do only the more contrived form of observation, the kind that occurs in situations that we construct and that occur on our own turf (which nonetheless has its own advantages and uses), both forms of observation must consider problems of access and/or the ethical issues that can be associated with observing others surreptitiously.

But assuming that we *do* get access to the setting or group that we wish to observe, the researcher's next challenge is to make specific decisions about what, and then how, to observe. A detailed inventory of all the various techniques and alternatives is beyond the scope of this text, but various sources offer us a few basic points to consider.

## Options Regarding Structure

A first dimension of interest is in how *structured* or *unstructured* the researcher wants the observational process to be. At the more *unstructured* end, the observer is *not* constrained by checklists and coding schemes, but rather reports, in narrative fashion, any observations relevant to the research objectives. This strategy provides maximal flexibility and can produce records with a comprehensiveness and richness not matched by other techniques. But any observation involves some degree of selection from all that occurs, and the danger with more unstructured schemes is that some portion of this selection may be unintentional and hence unacknowledged, implying unrecognized bias.

Of course, it's also quite possible to combine structured and less structured approaches during an extended field project. Indeed, many would argue that one should *begin* on a more unstructured basis during the preliminary, exploratory phases of observational research. During this period, one tries to contextualize the phenomenon of interest, gathering basic descriptive information that will inform subsequent analysis (e.g., How frequently does the phenomenon occur? Who's involved in the process? What other aspects of the process warrant scrutiny?).

The preliminary phase is also a time to sharpen research questions, to consult with people who are knowledgeable in the field along with those who are most likely to be affected, and to decide what particular types of data will be used as indicators for the key concepts of interest.

A primary hazard to avoid here is in *not* making the transition to more focused observation. Certainly a more focused research question facilitates this transition, as does the imposition or generation of theory. The danger, as Cicourel (1964) notes, is that without theory or a clearly focused research question, the researcher has no guide for his or her activity, in which case the method may amount to little more than a never-ending “pilot study” that accomplishes little or nothing.

### Some Places to Start

Obviously, what one looks for will depend on one’s particular research objectives and understanding of the phenomenon of interest. Nonetheless, an inventory of some “basic” attributes may be considered. Most generally, J. Lofland (1971) argues that, when you boil it all down, everything we call “social science” can be said to address one or more of the following three questions:

- ◆ What are the *characteristics* of a social phenomenon, the forms it assumes, the variations it displays?
- ◆ What are the *causes* of a social phenomenon, the forms it assumes, the variations it displays?
- ◆ What are the *consequences* of a social phenomenon, the forms it assumes, the variations it displays? (13)

As one might expect when all of social science is summarized in three sentences, Lofland’s synopsis subsumes considerable complexity. Consider how time is represented in these questions. In pointing to *characteristics* or attributes of the phenomenon under study, Lofland is talking about *now*, the present. Implicit is a detailed and laborious description of the

phenomenon as it is. Questions about *causes* direct our attention to the *past*. What are the antecedents of the phenomenon? Which of these are noteworthy in the generation or emergence or shaping of the phenomenon? Finally, questions about *consequences* direct us to the *future*. In what sense is the phenomenon itself an initiator or cause of subsequent events? How does variation in the phenomenon relate to subsequent variation in other phenomena of interest?

J. Lofland (1971) considers the delineation of *characteristics* to be qualitative analysis and the articulation of *causes* and *consequences* to be quantitative analysis. But what characteristics are of interest to us?

### PARTICIPANTS

Since social science focuses on human behaviour, it seems reasonable to focus on the humans who inhabit our chosen milieu. Thus, as a minimum, you should describe participants in terms of demographics (e.g., age, sex), as well as other variables of interest that you note when observing, that appear in the literature as identified correlates, or that your particular theoretical dispositions dictate. *Who are these people?*

### ACTS AND ACTIVITIES

What people *do* is clearly of interest to social scientists; their behaviour in the setting of interest will be one component of any complete observational account. Such behaviour may include anything from relatively brief, situationally constrained acts to elaborate activities that occur over more extended periods of time. What is happening? Involving whom? What aspects of the behaviour are of particular interest to you (e.g., the way strangers are socialized into the setting; the way friendships form; the informal social rules that guide action)? Observation that extends over time helps researchers identify regularities and idiosyncrasies in behaviour patterns that will in turn help focus subsequent research.

### WORDS AND MEANINGS

Related to, but not necessarily synonymous with, what people do is what they *say*. This element of the

observational process can obviously include a lot: for example, the attitudes and beliefs that are espoused during ongoing activity, the explanations and accounts that people offer for what they do and how they do it, and the personal and social meaning that people see in and derive from what they do.

There are many decisions to be made about how to capture speech. One choice will pertain to how passive or provocative the researcher chooses to be in relation to the participants. Will you listen to ongoing and spontaneous conversation, or will you actively question and unearth information of interest to you? These two stances should not be seen as mutually exclusive. You might, for example, wish to be more passive during the initial, exploratory phases of the research, in order to acquire information about spontaneous activities and utterings, but later take a more provocative role in asking questions or seeking explanations/accounts.

### RELATIONSHIPS

The elements listed above focus on individuals, but people exist—both implicitly and explicitly—in relations with other people in the production of phenomena of interest. Many aspects of relationships might therefore be of interest to us in an observational setting. You'll want to know, for example, who's a "regular" in the setting and who's more transient or tangential. You also may wish to ascertain the formal and informal roles different people occupy in the setting, and what these roles mean to them. And of course, all of social psychology opens up to you when you begin focusing on relationships: Who talks to whom? How and with whom is information shared? How are individuals recruited or screened for participation in the setting? What power relations exist? How do friendships and animosities evolve? How is status reaffirmed? What brings these people together?

### THE SETTING OR ENVIRONMENT

Action must happen somewhere, and the "somewhere" will tell you something about the individuals or group in question and potentially influence the action. What is the setting, and how is it perceived

by both participants and the broader society? How do participants personalize and utilize the setting? To whom is the setting open, and to whom is it closed? How is accessibility conveyed? What objects are present, and what do their nature and position convey about the group or individuals being observed?

### HISTORY

Social scientists rarely study situations that just appear. Our presence on-site often in itself signifies that the group or setting we're observing has been around at least long enough to have caught our attention. Many observers in the social sciences view a knowledge of the history of any setting or group as an integral part of understanding its current complexities.

Any study of history will be partly *descriptive* (e.g., certain persons or groups participated; certain events occurred on particular dates) and partly *interpretive* (e.g., we make inferences about why certain people were involved and the role they played, or we articulate what we feel is the broader significance of the processes we observed). Thus, historical accounts are themselves worthy of study *as* accounts, since they reflect the perspective of the person or group offering the account. It's no accident, for example, that the Euro-dominated societies of Canada, the United States, and Australia typically trace their histories to their "discovery" by, respectively, John Cabot (in 1497, although French Canadians more typically ignore Cabot and begin with Jacques Cartier in 1534), Christopher Columbus (in 1492), and Arthur Phillip (in 1788), as if no other cultures had ever visited these places before (although in fact that wasn't so; see Wolf 1982) and as if the land the European explorers found had been barren of any human population at the time (which it certainly was not). Who the heroes and heroines are, what events are identified as "important," and the nature of myths and legends all tell something about the individual, group, or setting under study.

At the same time, you should always be aware of history as a social construction, and its openness to revision. Although we can't recall the source, we have

always been struck by the profundity of the statement “History is a justification of the present.”<sup>8</sup> History is, virtually by definition, always written from the writer’s vantage point. And since those in power are the ones who write mainstream histories, their samplings of past events comprise all those things that were “important” (from that perspective) in getting to where we are today. To the extent that certain events are impossible to ignore (such as world wars or changes of government), the “spin” placed on them typically makes “our” people the heroes and heroines, while others are ignored or their contributions minimized, and the vanquished are deemed unworthy of mention.<sup>9</sup> Current events and characteristics are assumed to be “natural” or “inevitable,” and history is the name given to accounts of the glories and errors we encountered en route to the enlightened present. Still, as Yogi Berra is reputed to have said, “It ain’t over ’til it’s over”<sup>10</sup>—that is, no history can ever hope to be “complete” until there’s nobody left on earth to write it. In the interim, social scientists should be as interested in and as cautious about historical accounts as they are concerning other data sources.

### COMBINING ELEMENTS

The components listed above shouldn’t be seen as an inventory of things to include or as a rigid outline for your ultimate report. To quote J. Lofland (1971), “what have been outlined ... [are nothing more than] ... *elements* with which to sort and classify observations and to build some *other kind* of analytic scheme for one’s observational materials” (54; italics in original). The researcher’s task is to ascertain what is important and what isn’t, and then to build or test a theory or account of how the relevant elements interact over time to produce the phenomenon of interest.

This is not to minimize the importance of a clearly defined research question and set of research objectives. Indeed, the components discussed tie in with Becker’s (1958) delineation of the phases of observational research. Two of the phases he notes are (1) selecting problems to study, concepts to employ, and indicators through which to opera-

tionalize the phenomenon and its attendant explanatory concepts; and (2) gathering descriptive and relational information concerning the frequency and distribution of the phenomenon under study. A central aim is the contextualization of the phenomenon under study, that is, determining where and how the phenomenon of interest fits into the social process being observed. This leads us to Becker’s (1958) third phase, which involves (3) articulating individual findings *along with* a model of the organization (or group or process) under investigation.

In sum, Becker (1958) exhorts us to articulate our understanding of the process that the phenomenon under study is part of, since doing so will help organize our findings and indicate something of their meaning to both the participants and the researchers.<sup>11</sup>

### Field Notes

Many novice researchers, as suggested at the beginning of this chapter, fail to distinguish “observation” from “just looking.” “Just looking” is something we all do whenever we enter a setting. “Observation” is an empirical technique that involves looking for a purpose—one has an analytical interest and is prepared to gather “relevant” data, however those terms are defined.

In more formal/structured settings, the researcher’s role is clear; you will arrive with clipboard and coding scheme in hand, and there will be predetermined rules you will have established (when you decided how to operationalize your variables of interest) that specify whom to observe and at what times. But even when all your formal data coding is done on prescribed sheets, we strongly advise that you either include a space for “comments” at the bottom of the sheet or have a small pad of paper at the ready. In some settings, a videotape may be made of the activity for future analysis. And in even less structured situations, the researcher who doesn’t have easy access to paper and pen is a fool.

Even for structured observation methods, but especially for less structured ones like participant observation and ethnography, field notes are integral

to observation. *No* observational session is complete until those notes have been done. The notes should specify the time and place of observation, the people present and their spatial distribution and interaction, and any other details the observer deems of interest. Field notes are normally very personal documents, and they have a crucial role, particularly in less structured observational research, because they're the raw data on which your analysis will be based. They are rarely shown to anyone but members of one's research group and would virtually never be published as is (see Malinowski 1967 for an exception). So feel free to insert comments, make queries to yourself, and speculate about what might be occurring.

Richardson (1994), for example, advises that when taking field notes, she distinguishes between several different types of notes via a shorthand she has developed for herself:

*Observation notes* (ON): These are as concrete and detailed as I am able to make them. I want to think of them as fairly accurate renditions of what I see, hear, feel, taste, and so on.

*Methodological notes* (MN): These are messages to myself regarding how to collect “data”—who to talk to, what to wear, when to phone, and so on. I write a lot of these because I like methods, and I like to keep a process diary of my work.

*Theoretical notes* (TN): These are hunches, hypotheses, poststructuralist connections, critiques of what I am doing/thinking/seeing. I like writing these because they open up my text—my field note text—to alternative interpretations and a critical epistemological stance. It is a way of keeping me from being hooked on my “take” on reality.

*Personal notes* (PN): These are feelings statements about the research, the people I am talking to, myself doing the process, my doubts, my anxieties, my pleasures. I do no censoring here at all. I want all my feelings out on paper because I like them and because I know they are there anyway,

affecting what/how I lay claim to knowing. Writing personal notes is a way for me to know myself better, a way of using writing as a method of inquiry into the self. (526)

Our systems aren't so differentiated, although we try to include the same variety of notes that Richardson (1994) reports. Ted simply distinguishes between things he's describing (on the basis of observing, hearing, etc.) and remarks he makes to himself that bear on personal feelings, tentative interpretations, questions to consider, future information to acquire, and so on. He just writes the former directly, enclosing the latter in square brackets to set them off as notes to himself. [For example, at this point in the reading, you might be remarking to yourself that you would benefit from borrowing one of the classic ethnographies referred to in this chapter from the library to see firsthand how the process of ethnography is often described.]

Regardless of the particular style you develop, such notes are important. Because they create an ongoing record or personal archive over the course of your study, they act as a diary of the process you've gone through. You can look back over them to see how your knowledge and understandings of the situation have changed over time, to check whether all your ongoing speculations have been tested, or to discover any discrepancies or inconsistencies that might have become evident over time.

Of course, it may not always be comfortable or feasible to actually take notes in the setting itself, although it's always advisable to at least jot down very brief notes or key words that will help you remember the chronology of the session. Whatever the case, always leave time at the end of each observational session to retire to a private location as soon as possible, *before* engaging in any other activities, to flesh out and organize the notes you've taken, which often are written all over the paper, in the margins, and with circles and arrows and perhaps little maps all around. And don't underestimate the length of time it'll take you to do so; many experienced observers suggest that you can expect to spend four hours formalizing your notes for every hour of obser-

vation (e.g., see Adler & Adler 1994; Berg 2007; Lofland et al. 2006). The longer you wait, the poorer the record.

If you make note-taking a habit, your skills will improve substantially with experience. For example, Ted now finds that as long as he's able to jot down a few notes and key words that reflect the overall chronology of a session, he can use them to generate an astonishingly detailed description of events that can leave people wondering whether the session was actually tape-recorded. A good place to practise such note-taking is in your classes. You probably take notes on lectures. If you do not already do so, try sitting down as soon as possible after each class and rewriting your notes, embellishing certain points. With practice, you should soon be able to virtually re-create the whole lecture, and you'll find your later notes far better organized and thoughtful than the ones made during class, where the lecture's pace can cause you to leave points out. The worst thing you can do (besides taking no lecture notes at all) is take your lecture notes and then not look at them again until it's time to study for your exams. By that time, the train of thought will have been lost, the squiggles and arrows that seemed so meaningful at the time will appear completely unfathomable, and you may have trouble following your notes, although they seemed perfectly logical when you first wrote them.