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Observations on Observation

Continuities and Challenges

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Observation has been characterized as “the fundamental base of all research methods” in the social and behavioral sciences (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 389) and as “the mainstay of the ethnographic enterprise” (Werner & Schoepfle, 1987, p. 257). Qualitative social scientists are observers both of human activities and of the physical settings in which such activities take place. In qualitative research, observations typically take place in settings that are the natural loci of activity. Such naturalistic observation is therefore an integral part of ethnographic fieldwork.

Naturalistic observation is a technique for the collection of data that are, in the ideal at least, as unobtrusive as possible. Even fieldworkers who think of themselves as participant observers usually strive to make the process as objective as possible despite their quasi-insider status. The notion of unobtrusive, objective observation has not, however, gone uncontested. The prescient, discipline-spanning scholar Gregory Bateson (1972) developed a “cybernetic” theory in which the observer is inevitably tied to what is observed. More recently, postmodernists in various disciplines have emphasized the importance of understanding researchers’ “situations” (e.g., their gender, social class, ethnicity) as part of interpreting the products of their research.

The potency and pervasiveness of the postmodernist critique of traditional assumptions about objectivity have led some qualitative researchers to rethink

and revise their approaches to observational methods. In a very important sense, we now function in a context of collaborative research in which the researcher no longer operates at a distance from those being observed. The latter are no longer referred to as “subjects” of research but as active partners who understand the goals of research and who help the researcher formulate and carry out the research plan. Judith Friedenber (1998, p. 169), for example, has advocated the solicitation of feedback on ethnographic constructions from study populations “using techniques that minimize the researcher’s control of the interview situation and enhance intellectual dialog.” Valerie Matsumoto (1996) sent a prepared set of questions for the people she was interested in interviewing for an oral history project. She assured them that any questions to which they objected would be eliminated. The potential respondents reacted favorably to this invitation to participate in the formulation of the research plan. As such situations have become the norm, Michael Angrosino and Kimberly Mays de Pérez (2000) advocated a shift away from thinking of observation strictly as a data collection technique; rather, it should also be seen as a context in which those involved in the research collaboration can interact.

To clarify that shift, it may be helpful to briefly review both the classic tradition of naturalistic observation and the more contextualized analysis of the research collaboration as it has developed in response to current challenges both academic (e.g., the postmodernist critique) and in the society that we aim to study.

Observation-Based Research: The Classic Tradition

The creed of the classic tradition of observational research was explained by R. L. Gold (1997, p. 397), who noted that researchers believed it was both possible and desirable to develop standardized procedures that could “maximize observational efficacy, minimize investigator bias, and allow for replication and/or verification to check out the degree to which these procedures have enabled the investigator to produce valid, reliable data that, when incorporated into his or her published reports, will be regarded by peers as objective findings.” Ethnographers were supposed to adhere to a “self-correcting investigative process” that included adequate and appropriate sampling procedures, systematic techniques for gathering and analyzing data, validation of data, avoidance of observer bias, and documentation of findings (Clifford, 1983, p. 129; Gold, 1997, p. 399).

According to Gold (1958), the sociological ethnographers of the first half of the 20th century often made implicit reference to a typology of roles that might characterize naturalistic research: the complete participant (a highly subjective stance whose scientific validity was automatically suspect), the participant-as-observer (only slightly less problematic), the observer-as-participant (more typically associated with anthropologists), and the complete (unobtrusive) observer. The purity of the latter type—difficult to attain even under controlled laboratory conditions, let alone in the field—was, as we can now see, compromised by the tendency of unobtrusive researchers to go about their business without informed consent, an ethical lapse that can no longer be tolerated. It is now very clear that the ethical imperative to provide informed consent paved the way toward the model of collaborative research that is now the norm because the process of obtaining such consent inevitably involves the people being studied in activity of research from the very beginning. In any case, the canons of observational research were modified long before the advent of the postmodernist critique as an awareness of relative degrees of researcher “membership” in a community under study entered the discussion (Adler & Adler, 1987). Nevertheless, even researchers who were active “members” were still enjoined to be careful “not to alter the flow of interaction unnaturally” (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 380). The underlying assumption remained: A “natural” flow of social life could exist independent of the efforts of researchers to study it.

Anthropological ethnographers were less concerned than were their sociological cousins with obtrusiveness and its attendant delict, observer bias. Anthropological ethnographers were, however, still encouraged to seek objectivity in the midst of their acknowledged subjective immersion in a study community, and they did so by engaging in a three-step process of observation. First, there was “descriptive observation,” which meant, to all intents and purposes, the observation of every conceivable aspect of the situation. Anthropologists at this point were supposed to be “childlike,” assuming that they knew nothing and could take nothing for granted. There was, in effect, to be no sorting out of the important from the trivial based on assumptions carried into the field setting. As researchers became more familiar with the setting, however, they could move to the second step, “focused observation,” at which point they could with some confidence discern the relevant from the irrelevant. Focused observation almost always involved interviewing because researchers could not rely on their own intuition to make such discernments. Focused observations usually concentrated on well-defined types of group activities (e.g., religious rituals, classroom instruction, political campaigns). The third and final step was the most systematic—“selective observation”—at which point ethnographers could concentrate on the

elements of social action that are most salient, presumably from the “native” point of view (Werner & Schoepfle, 1987, pp. 262–264).

Observation-Based Research in Light of Current Concerns

Contemporary fieldwork has three major attributes: (1) the increasing willingness of ethnographers to affirm or develop a more than peripheral membership role in communities they study; (2) the recognition of the possibility that it may be neither feasible nor possible to harmonize observer and insider perspectives to achieve an objective consensus about “ethnographic truth”; (3) the transformation of the erstwhile subjects of research into collaborative partners in research (e.g., Angrosino, 2007a; Creswell, 2007). The goal of contemporary observational research is not to replace the classic ideal of pure objectivity with one of total, membership-driven empathy. Both of these approaches remain as constituent elements in the process of observation-based research; they represent, however, extreme points at opposite ends of a continuum of research practice. The problem with both extremes is that they assume that it is both feasible and desirable to describe or interpret cultures and societies as if those depictions could exist without ethnographers being part of the action. Observation-based research nowadays must certainly consider the attributes and activities of ethnographers themselves; it is therefore considerably more subjective than those of the classic tradition would have countenanced. But it cannot become so utterly subjective that it loses the rigor of carefully conducted, clearly recorded, and intelligently interpreted observations; ethnography is more than casually observed opinion.

Angrosino and Mays de Pérez (2000, pp. 678–690) discuss the ways in which these factors have come to be established in the current ethnographic literature and the implications of these changes for both the conduct and the interpretation of observation-based research. They note that whereas classic ethnographic fieldworkers insisted on their objectivity and adopted limited participatory roles only as the ethics of “pure observation” were questioned, latter-day researchers consciously seek out and adopt situational identities that give them defined membership roles in the communities they study. As their membership roles deepen, ethnographers must become attuned to life as it is actually lived, which means that they must pay increasing attention to the ways in which their potential collaborators in study communities want to be studied. The older notion of imposing a predetermined “scientific” agenda (itself now often seen as a product

of a Western, elite bias), which was so integral to the objective aims of the classic period, has been set aside. Although rarely acknowledged at the time, the classic approach was based on a model of interaction in which power resided in the ethnographer (who set the research agenda and implicitly represented the more generalized power of elite institutions); power is now clearly shared. In the case of certain applied or advocate social scientists, power is actually ceded to the study community; researchers of this orientation may well see themselves as agents of those communities in the same way that they once thought of themselves as extensions of their academic institutions or granting organizations.

The imperative to acknowledge the shift in power to study communities takes on particular importance when, as is now so often the case, ethnography is conducted “without the ethnos” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1996b, p. 2). In other words, few ethnographers function within the circumscribed communities that lent coherence to the cultures or societies that figured so prominently in the conceptual frameworks of the classic period of observational research. It is no longer possible to assume that “the cultural object of study is fully accessible within a particular site” (Marcus, 1997, p. 96). Much of the current “field” in which “fieldwork” is conducted consists of people who inhabit the “borders between culture areas,” of localities that demonstrate a diversity of behavioral and attitudinal patterns, of “postcolonial hybrid cultures,” and of the social change and cultural transformations that are typically found “within interconnected spaces” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1996a, p. 35). In the classic period, it was assumed that because people lived in a common space they therefore came to share social institutions and cultural assumptions. Nowadays, “it is the communities that are accidental, not the happenings” (Malkki, 1996, p. 92), particularly in the case of “virtual” communities that spring up, flourish, and then vanish—seemingly overnight—on the Internet. Ethnographers therefore no longer enjoy the luxury of assuming that the local scenes they observe are somehow typical or representative of any single culture or society. Rather, any observed community is more likely to be understood as a “nexus of interactions defined by interstitiality and hybridity” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1996a, p. 48). Researchers who depend on observation must therefore be increasingly careful not to confuse the shifting interactions of people with multiple affiliations in both real and virtual space as if they were the bounded communities of old. To take a clearly articulated membership role in such diffuse settings, a researcher must be willing to be explicit about his or her own gender, sexual identity, age, class, and ethnicity because such factors form the basis of his or her affinity with potential study collaborators, rather than the simple fact of hanging around in a defined space. These situational factors are likely to shift from one research project to the next, so ethnographers are in a

position of having to “reinvent themselves in diverse sites” (Giroux, 1995, p. 197). Norman Denzin (1997, p. 46) discusses the “mobile consciousness” of ethnographers who are aware of their “relationship to an ever-changing external world.”

Much of the recent literature bearing on the creation, maintenance, and evolution of observers’ identities has dealt with issues particular to women and lesbians and gay men. (This literature is vast, but a few representative studies that demonstrate the blending of observational sociocultural detail with analysis of personal “situations” include Behar, 1993; Blackwood, 1995; Lang, 1996; Walters, 1996; D. Wolf, 1996.) It is worth mentioning, however, that there are other identity issues that are of concern to researchers who study situations of political unrest and who come to be identified with politically proscribed groups (Hammond, 1996; Mahmood, 1996; Sluka, 1990), or who work with groups that are defined by their need for deceptive concealment, such as illegal immigrants (Chavez, Flores, & Lopez-Garza, 1990; Stepick & Stepick, 1990), or those involved in criminal activities (Agar & Feldman, 1980; Brewer, 1992; Dembo et al., 1993; Koester, 1994; van Gelder & Kaplan, 1992). In the post-9/11 era, it has been increasingly difficult to conduct ethnographic research in Muslim American communities, particularly if the research deals specifically with young men (Sirin & Fine, 2008).

The Question of Context: The Overlapping Roles of Observational Researchers

In the classic period, ethnographers had to be concerned with only one audience—the academic/scientific community. Although that community could hardly be said to have spoken with one voice, it certainly did share a set of assumptions about what a proper research report looked and sounded like. In our own time, however, there seem to be as many different formats in which a report can be disseminated as there are constituencies to which ethnographers are now responsible. Researchers must therefore be concerned with the ways in which their observations come to be translated into the different voices suitable for multiple audiences. Traditional research reports favored the supposedly objective third-person voice, emanating from the “omniscient narrator” (Tierney, 1997, p. 27). The shift to collaborative research allows ethnographers to acknowledge their own presence; the once-banned “I” is now much more common as subjective experience comes to the fore, a trend apparently encouraged by feminist scholars who often felt marginalized by the academic world and its

objectifying tendencies (M. Wolf, 1992, p. 52). This shift is no mere matter of stylistic preference; it reflects evolving self-images of ethnographers, changing relations between observers and those they observe (with explicit permission), and new perceptions about the diverse, and possibly even contradictory, audiences to whom ethnographic research is now addressed.

Ethnographers can no longer claim to be the sole arbiters of knowledge about the societies and cultures they study because they are in a position to have their representations read and contested by those for whom they presume to speak (Bell & Jankowiak, 1992). In effect, objective truth about a society or culture cannot be established because there are inevitably going to be conflicting versions of what happened. Researchers can no longer claim the privilege of authoritative knowledge when there are all too many other collaborators ready and able to challenge them. Margery Wolf (1992, p. 5) notes that as a fledgling ethnographer she was “satisfied to describe what I thought I saw and heard as accurately as possible, to the point of trying to resolve differences of opinion among my informants.” She eventually came to realize “the importance of retaining those ‘contested meanings.’” She wryly concludes that any member of the study community is likely to “show up on your doorstep with an Oxford degree and your book in hand” (1992, p. 137). In sum, the results of observational research can never be “reducible to a form of knowledge that can be packaged in the monologic voice of the ethnographer alone” (Marcus, 1997, p. 92). To be sure, given the complexities of publication and other genres for the dissemination of ethnographic research, it is still almost always the case that the researcher is the visible “author” of a report. Attempts to get the actual voices of all collaborators onto the public record have been spotty at best.

Observation-based research is not simply a data-collection technique; it forms the context in which ethnographic fieldworkers assume membership roles in communities they want to study. They do so in a process of negotiation with those who are already members and who might act as collaborators in the research process. They bring to that negotiation their own “situations” (i.e., gender, sexual orientation, age, social class, ethnicity), all of which must necessarily figure in the kinds of roles they might assume and the ways in which they will be allowed to interact with those already involved in the setting. For these reasons, naturalistic observation can only be understood in light of the results of specific interactive negotiations in specific contexts representing (perhaps temporary) loci of interests. The old notion that cultures or social institutions have an independent existence has been set aside. By the same token, neither cultures nor social institutions are reducible to the experiences of those who observe them. Observation, if it is to be useful to the research process, must be as rigorously conducted as it was in

the classic period; our social scientific powers of observation must, however, be turned on ourselves and the ways in which our experiences interface with those of others in the same context if we are to come to a full understanding of socio-cultural processes. Former generations of researchers were certainly not unaware of these experiential factors, but they were taught always to be aware of them so as to minimize them and hold them constant against the ethnographic truth.

The autonomous, enduring culture that embodies its own timeless truth may, however, no longer be an operative concept. After all, a researcher “never observes the behavioral event which ‘would have taken place’ in his or her absence, nor hears an account identical with that which the same narrator would have given to another person” (Behar, 1996, p. 6), so how could we ever be sure of that disembodied cultural reality? But the ways in which we as researchers negotiate the shifting sands of interaction, if we are careful to observe and analyze them, are important clues to the ways in which societies and culture form, maintain themselves, and eventually dissolve. In other words, the contexts may be evanescent, but the ways in which those contexts come to be may well represent enduring processes of human interaction.

Current Challenges for Observation-Based Researchers

The context of contemporary observation-based research is shaped by the situational characteristics of the researchers themselves and their potential collaborators, and by several important changes in the general intellectual climate, in academic culture, and in the nature of an increasingly globalized, seemingly borderless society. These issues have been dealt with elsewhere by Angrosino (2007a, 2007b). Only a few of these trends, those with perhaps the most direct bearing on the conduct of observation-based research, will be summarized here.

ETHICAL/REGULATORY CONSTRAINTS

It has been noted that the old ideal of purely objective observation ultimately ran afoul of a new ethical climate that privileged informed consent and confidentiality to the extent that these principles were encoded in guidelines and institutional structures governing the conduct of research funded by public moneys—which, in the contemporary context, is just about everything. The early history of research ethics is covered by Murray Lionel Wax and Joan Cassell

(1979). The contemporary scene is covered by Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban (2003). A few of the highlights are discussed here.

Virtually all social research in our time is governed by the structure of institutional review boards (IRBs), which grew out of federal regulations beginning in the 1960s that mandated informed consent for all those participating in federally funded research. The perceived threat was from “intrusive” research (usually biomedical), participation in which was to be under the control of the “subjects,” who had a right to know what was going to happen to them and to agree formally to all provisions of the research. They must be fully apprised of both direct benefits and potential risks (including risks to their privacy) entailed in the research. (See the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979.) The right of informed consent, and the review boards that were eventually created to enforce it at each institution receiving federal moneys, radically altered the power relationship between researcher and “subject,” allowing both parties to have a say in the conduct and character of research.

Ethnographic researchers, however, were initially uncomfortable with this situation—not, of course, because they wanted to conduct covert, harmful research, but because they did not believe that their research was “intrusive.” Such a claim was of a piece with the assumptions typical of the observer-as-participant role. As ethnographers became more comfortable with more engaged participatory roles, they came to agree that their very presence was an occasion of change, although they continued to resist the notion that their “intrusion” was by definition harmful. Ethnographers were also concerned that the proposals sent to IRBs had to be fairly complete, so that all possibilities for doing harm might be adequately assessed. Their research, they argued, often grew and changed as it went along and could not always be set out with the kind of predetermined specificity that the legal experts seemed to expect (and that has always been appropriate in biomedical and other forms of clinical/experimental research).

In the 1980s, social scientists won from the federal Department of Health and Human Services an exemption from review for all social research except that dealing with children, people with disabilities, and others defined as members of “vulnerable” populations. Nevertheless, legal advisers at many universities (including the University of South Florida [USF] where both the authors have been based) have opted for caution and have been very reluctant to allow this near-blanket exemption to be applied. As a result, at USF it is possible for a proposal to undergo “expedited” (or “partial”) review if it seems to meet the federal criteria for exemption, but a formal proposal must still be filed. This practice is required under guidelines promulgated by the U.S. Department of Health and

Human Services in 2005 (Code of Federal Regulations, Title 45, Part 46) (see Office of the Federal Register, 2009).

USF now has two IRBs—one for biomedical research and one for “behavioral research.” Because the latter is dominated by psychologists (by far the largest department in the social science division of the College of Arts and Sciences), this separate status rarely works to the satisfaction of qualitative researchers. Psychologists, used to dealing with hypothesis-testing, experimental, clinical/lab-based research, have been reluctant to recognize a subcategory of “observational” research design. As a result, the proposal format currently required by the behavioral research IRB is couched in terms of the individual subject rather than in terms of populations or communities, and it mandates the statement of a hypothesis to be tested and a “protocol for the experiment.” Formats more congenial to the particular needs of qualitative researchers have not been fully explored or adopted at USF. It is perhaps plausible to maintain that qualitative research is really a species of humanistic scholarship and not “science” at all, social or otherwise. If qualitative inquiry is not “research” in the scientific sense, it must be automatically exempt from IRB oversight. This point of view, however, has not gained much traction. For one thing, qualitative researchers are, on the whole, unwilling to give up their scientific status. Moreover, they are unwilling to reinforce the suspicion that they are simply trying to evade their ethical responsibilities. The trick is to comply with currently accepted ethical standards without compromising the very premises of qualitative inquiry. But this form of inquiry as currently practiced really does confound traditional definitions of scientific research. For one thing, the kind of “collaborative” research currently in favor among qualitative researchers further militates against strict compliance with the guidelines for informed consent. In collaborative research, the ethnographer must discuss research plans with members of the prospective study community, so must these preliminary discussions also conform to norms of informed consent, or do the latter only apply to the formal research plans that ultimately emerge from the collaborative consultations?

Given the now widespread ethical suspicions about “pure” observational research, it is ironic that the only kind of social research that is explicitly mentioned and routinely placed in the “exempt” category at USF is that of observations of behavior in public spaces. But it was just this sort of “unobtrusive” observation that led to questions about the propriety of conducting research in the absence of informed consent in the first place. Having largely abandoned this genre of “public” research because of its ethical problems, will ethnographers return to it simply to avoid the philosophical and legal entanglements raised by the IRB structure for their kind of research?

A recent report from the Institute of Medicine (IOM, 2002), a body that one would think represents an old, established paradigm of research ethics, challenged researchers in all disciplines to rethink the fundamentals of research ethics. Its report pointed out that we have become used to asking basically negative questions (e.g., what is misconduct? how can it be prevented?). It might be preferable to consider the positive and ask, What is integrity? How do we find out whether we have it? How can we encourage it? The promotion of researcher integrity has both individual and institutional components, and those in charge of monitoring professional ethics should be in the business of “encouraging individuals to be intellectually honest in their work and to act responsibly, and encouraging research institutions to provide an environment in which that behavior can thrive” (Grinnell, 2002, p. B15). One possible way to accomplish this aim, constructed on a philosophy of “proportionate reason,” was explored by Angrosino and Mays de Pérez (2000). The IOM went so far as to suggest that qualitative social researchers have a central role to play in the evolution of the structures of research ethics because they are particularly well equipped to conduct studies that could identify and assess the factors influencing integrity in research in both individuals and large social institutions.

THE CHANGING RESEARCH CONTEXT: TECHNOLOGY

Participant observation once implied a lone researcher working in a self-contained community, armed only with a notebook and pen, and perhaps a sketch pad and a simple camera. The mechanics of observation-based research were revitalized by the introduction of audiotape recorders, movie cameras, and later video recorders. Note-taking has been transformed by the advent of laptop computers and software programs for the analysis of narrative data. But as our technological sophistication has increased, ethnographers have begun to realize that the technology helps us capture and fix “reality” in ways that are somewhat at variance with our lived experience as fieldworkers. The great value of naturalistic observation has always been that we have immersed ourselves in the ebb and flow, in the ambiguities of life as it is lived by real people in real circumstances. To that traditional perception we have now become increasingly aware of our own part in that ever-changing interactive context. But the more we fix this or that snapshot of that life and the more we have the capacity to disseminate this or that image globally and instantaneously, the more we risk violating our sense of what makes real life so particular and therefore so endlessly fascinating. Video recording (still or moving) poses definite challenges to the ethical norms of the

protection of privacy and the maintenance of confidentiality, issues explored in detail by Lauren Clark and Oswald Werner (1997) and Werner and Clark (1998).

It may, perhaps, become necessary to turn our observational powers on the very process of observation, to understand ourselves as users of technology. Technological change is never merely additive; it is never simply an aid to doing what has always been done. It is, rather, *ecological* in the sense that a change in one aspect of behavior has ramifications throughout the entire system of which that behavior is a part. So the more sophisticated our technology, the more we change the way we do business. We need to begin to understand not only what happens when “we” encounter “them,” but when “we” do so with a particular kind of powerful technology. That we possess this technology (and the means to use it) while many of our likely research collaborators do not means that the power differential—which the shift to collaborative research was supposed to ameliorate—has only been exacerbated. (See Nardi & O’Day, 1999, for an elaboration of these points.)

THE CHANGING RESEARCH CONTEXT: GLOBALIZATION

Globalization is the process by which capital, goods, services, labor, ideas, and other cultural forms move freely across international borders. In our own time, communities that once existed in some degree of isolation have been drawn into interdependent relationships that extend around the globe. Globalization has been facilitated by the growth of information technology. News from all corners of the world is instantaneously available. Although once we could assume that the behaviors and ideas we observed or asked about in a particular community were somehow indigenous to that community, now we must ask literally where in the world they might have come from. Aihwa Ong and Stephen Collier (2005) provide an extended treatment of the implications of globalization on social research in general, and ethnographic research in particular. A few highlights are summarized here.

Communities are no longer necessarily place-bound, and the traditional influences of geography, topography, and climate are much less fixed than in days past. Increasing numbers of people are now explicitly “transnational” in their orientation, migrating from homeland to other places for work or study, but maintaining their ties to home. Such constant movement was difficult for earlier generations of migrants to achieve, as the high cost and relative inefficiency of earlier modes of transportation and communication were prohibitive for all but the most affluent. Doing observation-based research in a “transnational” community presents

obvious challenges. We could, of course, contrive to follow people around the globe, but doing so hardly seems practical in most cases. More often than not, we will continue to be place-bound researchers, but we will have to keep reminding ourselves that the “place” we are participating in and observing may no longer be the total social or cultural reality for all the people who are in some way or another affiliated with the community.

We can discern several aspects of the modern world that may help us take observational research beyond the small, traditional communities in which it developed. For one thing, we can now speak in terms of a world in which nations are economically and politically interdependent. The relationships of units within this global system are shaped in large measure by the global capitalist economy, which is committed to the maximization of profits rather than to the satisfaction of domestic needs. Some settings and events that might be studied by observational methods to contribute to our understanding of the global system include the nature of labor migration (Zuniga and Hernandez-Léon, 2001); the emergence of “outsourcing” and its impact on the traditional societies that are thus brought into the world of the dominant powers (Saltzinger, 2003); the transformation of the old Soviet sphere of influence (Wedel, 2002); and the dynamics of cultural diversity, multiculturalism, and culture contact (Maybury-Lewis, 2002). In the modern world, people are less defined by traditions of “high culture” and more likely to be influenced (and to be drawn together as a global “community”) by popular culture. The study of popular culture has been a staple of “cultural studies” for some time, and it is now well established in the mainstream disciplines as well (Bird, 2003; Fiske & Hartley, 2003).

THE CHANGING RESEARCH CONTEXT: VIRTUAL WORLDS

If they so choose, ethnographers can free themselves of “place” by means of the Internet—the “location” for so many of the most interesting communities on the contemporary scene. Virtual communities are characterized not by geographic proximity or long-established ties of heritage, but by computer-mediated communication and online interaction. They are “communities of interest” rather than communities of residence. Although some can last a while, they are mostly ephemeral in nature, and sometimes even by design.

Ethnography has demonstrably been carried out online (Jordan, 2009) although the nature of observation is necessarily somewhat altered. Living online is a 21st-century commonplace, and ethnography can certainly move into cyberspace along with the technology. Some cautions, however, are in order.

First, electronic communication is based almost exclusively on the written word, or on deliberately chosen images. The ethnographer who is used to “reading” behavior through the nuances of gesture, facial expression, and tone of voice is therefore at something of a disadvantage. Moreover, it is very easy for people online to disguise their identities; sometimes the whole purpose of participating in an online group is to assume a new identity. This is not to suggest that all individuals who may be found in virtual communities are engaging in deception. Indeed, members of such communities are all members of nonvirtual human organizations as well. Brigitte Jordan (2009) advances the paradigm of hybrid spaces, wherein the real and virtual personae of the members of online communities are considered.

A potential advantage to the use of the Internet as a vehicle for qualitative research is the potential for access to individuals who are reluctant to communicate directly. Russel Ayling and Avril Mewes (2009) describe Internet interviewing with gay men as one example of this process, although this advantage might also apply to other groups requiring or preferring concealment.

Using online interactions as a source of “observation” does, however, present certain challenges. For example, online conversations may well have deeply nuanced subtexts that depart markedly from the superficial meaning of the typed words. In the case of face-to-face conversations, a researcher can observe gestures, body language, use of space, and intonation patterns to go beneath the surface of the discourse. Other cues are almost certainly available to online in-groups, so it is imperative that researchers develop an understanding of the full range of communicative strategies available to members of a virtual community so that they do not rely on the words alone. Angela Garcia et al. (2009) cite an example of an online study of “skinheads” in which it was observed that the participants had established techniques for the conveyance of physicality, emotion, and feelings.

But are virtual communities really all that similar to traditional communities or social networks? How does electronic communication bring new communities into existence even as it enhances the ways in which older, established communities, now geographically dispersed, can keep in touch? Such questions lead us to the possibilities of research about specific people and their lives, as well as about the larger processes by which people define their lives.

Virtual ethnography also poses some ethical challenges that are similar to, but not exactly the same as, those that confront the fieldworker in traditional communities. The accepted norms of informed consent and protection of privacy and confidentiality continue to be important, even though we are dealing with people we do not see face-to-face. Although the Internet is a kind of public space

(which means it might, in theory at least, be exempt from IRB rules), the people who “inhabit” it are still individuals entitled to the same rights as people in more conventional places. There are as yet no comprehensive ethical guidelines applicable to online research, but a few principles seem to be emerging by consensus. First, research based on content analysis of a public website need not pose an ethical problem, and it is *probably* acceptable to quote passages posted on public message boards, as long as they are not attributed to identifiable correspondents. Second, members of an online community should be informed if an ethnographer is also online “observing” their activities for research purposes. If at all possible, the researcher should obtain “signed” informed consent forms from the members before continuing to be an observing presence on the site. Doing so might be impossible if a site attracts transient users; it remains to be decided whether informing the webmaster alone is sufficient. Members of a virtual community under observation should be assured that the researcher will not use real names (or identifiable made-up names), e-mail addresses, or any other identifying markers in any publications based on the research. If the online group has posted its rules for entering and participating, those norms should be honored by the researcher, just as he or she would respect the values and expectations of any other community in which he or she intended to act as a participant observer. By conforming to those posted rules, the researcher is, in effect, drawing the members into a collaborative circle; the research is as much a result of the community’s practices as it is of the researcher’s agenda. Some online ethnographers have also decided to share drafts of research reports for comment by members of the virtual community. By allowing members to help decide how their comments are to be used, the researcher furthers the goals of collaborative research. Because researchers working in cyberspace are operating with social formations that are much potential as existing in current real time (that is, they are perpetually “under construction”), an ethical posture that is active and anticipatory is needed, in contrast to the essentially reactive ethics of prior forms of research (Hakken, 2003).¹

The Search for Social Justice

The new contexts and challenges for observational research in our time as discussed earlier take on particular significance when researchers aim to move beyond academic discourse and use the fruits of their research to make an appreciable change in the world. As Norman Denzin and Michael Giardina

(2009, p. 11) insist, this is a “historical present that cries out for emancipator visions, for visions that inspire transformative inquiries, and for inquiries that can provide the moral authority to move people to struggle and resist oppression.” Observation-based research can certainly play a role in the pursuit of an agenda of human rights-oriented social justice, if only by producing vivid, evocative descriptive analyses of situations (such as those reviewed in the previous section of this article) that can serve a consciousness-raising function. To the extent that observational research is conducted in a participatory/collaborative mode, it can empower formerly “voiceless” people and communities. To the extent that the fruits of such research are widely disseminated through multiple media (not just the traditional academic outlets) in ways that express the multivocalic nature of the research process, those formerly voiceless communities are able to participate in a variety of public forums in which their non-mainstream positions can be effectively aired.

Angrosino (2005, p. 739) has defined *social justice* as the obligation of all people to apply moral principles to the systems and institutions of society; individuals and groups who seek social justice should take an active interest in necessary social and economic reforms. To that end, I have suggested three ways in which researchers can make a contribution to the pursuit of social justice.

First, the researcher should be directly connected to those marginalized by mainstream society; that is, the researchers should feel some sort of kinship (be it political or emotional) with those being studied and not treat them solely as depersonalized objects of research. There may certainly be communities of people who are deservedly marginalized, and social justice is certainly not served by having ethnographers directly connected to, say, White supremacists or purveyors of child pornography. (It is certainly possible to argue that we cannot tell researchers which groups they can or cannot empathize with. But since the codes of professional ethics associated with the various social science disciplines all emphasize an adherence to standards of human rights, it seems fair to conclude that if researchers choose to affiliate with groups that exist explicitly to violate the rights of others, then they do so outside the limits of accepted ethical professional practice.) There is, however, no shortage of communities of people marginalized because of the structures of oppression built into the current economic and political world system. Helping them might well involve intensive study of power elites, but a progressive agenda goes by the boards if the researcher comes to identify with those elites and sees the marginalized simply as “target populations” for policies and programs formulated on high. Direct connection necessarily involves becoming part of the everyday life of a marginalized community. Research in service to a progressive agenda flows from a

degree of empathy (not simply “rapport,” as traditional ethnographers might have defined it) that is not available to those who strive to maintain an objective distance.²

Second, the researcher should ask questions and search for answers. This might seem like such an obvious piece of advice that it hardly seems worth discussing. But we are in the habit of asking questions based primarily of our scholarly (i.e., distanced) knowledge of the situation at hand. We move in a more productive direction if we begin to ask questions based on our experience of life as it is actually experienced in the community under study. By the same token, we must avoid the sentimental conclusion that “the people” have all the answers, as if poverty and oppression automatically conferred wisdom and foresight. Asking the relevant questions might lead us to look within the community for answers drawing on its own untapped (and perhaps unrecognized) resources, or it might lead us to explore options beyond the community. One very effective role for the committed collaborative researcher might be that of culture broker, putting people in the study community in touch with other circles of interest to which they might not otherwise have had access.

Third, the researcher should become an advocate, which might mean becoming a spokesperson for causes and issues already defined by the community. It might also mean helping the people discern and articulate issues that may have been unstated or unresolved to that point. Advocacy often means engaging in some sort of conflict (either among factions within the community or between the community and the powers-that-be), but it can also mean finding ways to achieve consensus in support of an issue that has the potential to unite. In either case, one ends up working *with* the community, rather than working *for* the community, which implies a more distanced stance.

The overall goal of this process is to empower the community to take charge of its own destiny—to use research for its own ends and to assert its own position relative to the power elite. A researcher may well retain a personal agenda (e.g., collecting data to complete a dissertation), but his or her main aim should be to work with the community to achieve shared goals that move it toward a more just situation. Such a philosophy can be difficult to convey to students or other apprentice researchers, and so it might be instructive to consider a form of pedagogy that, although not specifically designed for this purpose, certainly serves these ends.

“Service learning” is basically a way of integrating volunteer community service with active guided reflection. Although encouraging students to volunteer is certainly praiseworthy in and of itself, service learning programs give students the opportunity to study social issues from social scientific perspectives so they

can understand what is going on in the agencies in which they are working. The combination of theory and action is sometimes referred to as *praxis*, and it is one way in which an engaged, committed, advocacy-oriented form of social science is carried out. Students do not simply carry out a set of tasks set by the agency—tasks that in and of themselves may not seem particularly meaningful but that take on very clear meaning when the students carefully observe the setting, the people, the interactions—in short, the total context in which those tasks are conducted. By combining academic learning with community service, students experience praxis—the linkage of theory and practice—firsthand (Roschelle, Turpin, & Elias, 2000, p. 840). Service learning was designed explicitly to reinvigorate the spirit of activism that energized campuses in the 1960s. Institutions that accepted this challenge formed a support network (Campus Compact) to develop and promote service learning as a pedagogical strategy. Service learning is now a national movement that has received recent additional public exposure in the form of the Clinton Global Initiative University. This nonpartisan project, founded by former President Bill Clinton, is designed to reach across college campuses and stimulate students to confront the challenges of pressing global issues (Clinton, 2008). It is the responsibility of concerned faculty to see that students have a service learning experience that expresses the three aspects of a social justice agenda as discussed earlier.

The philosophical antecedent and academic parent of service learning is experiential learning (e.g., cooperative education, internships, field placements), which was based on the direct engagement of the learner in the phenomenon being studied. The critical distinguishing characteristic of service learning is its emphasis on enriching student learning while revitalizing the community. To that end, service learning involves students in course-relevant activities that address real community needs. Community agencies are encouraged to take the initiative in defining their own needs and approaching the campus representatives to see if a group of students under faculty mentorship might be interested in helping them achieve their goals. Course materials (e.g., textbooks, lectures, discussions, reflections) inform students' service, and the service experience is brought back to the classroom to inform the academic dialogue and the quest for knowledge. This reciprocal process is based on the logical continuity between experience and knowledge. Anne Roschelle, Jennifer Turpin, and Robert Elias (2000) point out the critical importance of after-the-fact evaluation to ensure both a productive learning experience for the students and value to the community served. Elizabeth Paul (2006) argues for the inclusion of critical evaluation (or, perhaps more specifically, needs assessment) before the community-based effort to ensure that limited resources are most effectively applied.

The pedagogy of service learning reflects research indicating that we retain 60% of what we do, 80% of what we do with active guided reflection, and 90% of what we teach or give to others. The pedagogy is also based on the teaching of information processing skills rather than on the mere accumulation of information. In a complex society, it is nearly impossible to determine what information will be necessary to solve particular problems, especially those of intractable social inequalities. All too often, the content that students learn in class is obsolete by the time they obtain their degrees. Service learning advocates promote the importance of “lighting the fire” (i.e., teaching students how to think for themselves). Learning is not a predictable linear process. It may begin at any point during a cycle, and students might have to apply their limited knowledge in a service situation before consciously setting out to gain or comprehend a body of facts or the evolutionary development of a personal theory for future application. To ensure that this kind of learning takes place, however, skilled guidance in reflection on the experience must occur. By providing students with the opportunity to have a concrete experience and then assisting them in the intellectual processing of that experience, service learning takes advantage of a natural learning cycle and allows students to provide a meaningful contribution to the community (Marullo & Edwards, 2000).

It is important to emphasize that the projects that form the basis of the students’ experience are generated by agencies or groups in the community, not by faculty researchers. These projects can be either specific one-time efforts (e.g., a Habitat for Humanity home-building effort) or longer-term initiatives (e.g., the development of an after-school recreation and tutoring program based at an inner-city community center). All such activities build on the fundamentals of observational research. Student volunteers gradually adopt membership identities in the community and must nurture their skills as observers of unfamiliar interactions to carry out the specific mandates of the chosen projects and to act as effective change agents. In this way, even service learning projects affiliated with courses outside the social sciences require students to become practitioners of observational research methods. At USF, service learning has been a key feature of a diverse set of courses, including an anthropology seminar on community development, a sociology course on the effects of globalization, an interdisciplinary social science course on farm-worker and other rural issues, a psychology course on responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, a social work course on racial and ethnic relations, and a business seminar on workplace communication and cultural diversity issues.

In sum, service learning affects the professional educator as well as the novice or student. Service learning is more than traditional “applied social science,”

which often had the character of “doing for” a community. Service learning begins with the careful observation of a community by a committed student adopting a membership identity; he or she goes on to an active engagement in and with the community in ways that foster the goals of a social justice-oriented progressive political and social agenda.

Prospects for Observation-Based Research: Are We in a Post-Postmodern Period?

Patricia Adler and Peter Adler (1994, p. 389) observed, “Forecasting the wax and wane of social science research methods is always uncertain.” Nevertheless, it is probably safe to say that observation-based research is going to be increasingly committed to what Lila Abu-Lughod (1991, p. 154) called “the ethnography of the particular.” Rather than attempting to describe the composite culture of a group or to analyze the full range of institutions that supposedly constitute the society, the observation-based researcher will be able to provide a rounded account of the lives of particular people, focusing on the lived experience of specific people and their ever-changing relationships. Angrosino (2005, p. 741) has expressed some doubt about the stability of the marriage between observation-based research and more positivistic forms of social science, but we are no longer so certain that a divorce is imminent, at least to the extent that there is an emerging consensus around a social justice agenda such that the disagreements are more about means rather than about the ends of research.

It also seems safe to predict that observation-based research, no less than any other genre of social research, will be influenced by changing technology and the inescapable presence of the online parallel world. Whether in the virtual world or the real world, observation-based researchers will continue to grapple with the ethical demands of their work. Those who seek “exemption” from the guidelines seem to be very much in the minority. On the other hand, the rise of a committed, social justice-oriented agenda means that ethical questions of an increasingly complex and vexing nature will continue to arise. A renewed framework for understanding research ethics, such as the one proposed by the IOM, may be one way to deal with this issue.

It seems clear that the once unquestioned hegemony of positivistic epistemology that encompassed even so apparently humanistic a research technique as observation has now been shaken to its roots by the postmodernist critique among other factors. But what lies beyond that critique? Postmodernists often

seem to suggest that because absolute truth is an impossibility, any effort to take action is bound to be compromised by the situational biases of researchers and would-be reformers. But it is certainly possible to base sound reformist action on the foundation of the provisional truth that results in the negotiated contexts created by researchers and their collaborators in study communities, as the service learning experiment seems to demonstrate. The IOM-style reform of research ethics (see IOM, 2002, and the discussion thereof in an earlier section of this chapter) is also based on such provisional, negotiated, collaborative arrangements (rather than absolutist edicts from on high). It is clear in hindsight that we needed the postmodernist critique to help us rethink the assumptions of our traditions of research; it is equally clear that we now have the means to go forward with the fruits of our rethinking—if we but have the political will to do so.

Notes

1. The Association of Internet Researchers has produced a document on ethical practice (Ess & the AoIR Ethics Working Group, 2002), which may be a useful guide for those pursuing this type of research. See also Bruckman (2002).
2. As of this writing, the term *empathy* is at the center of a complex, but eye-opening political debate. We use the term here in a much more restricted sense, mainly to refer to the development of a researcher's primary commitment to the agenda of the community under study.

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