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Note

Fitting in: the researcher as learner and participant *

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Introduction

Gold (1958) used the term "participant-as-observer" to identify the fieldwork role in which the researcher is known as such by his or her subjects. One problem faced by this type of scientist, which is avoided by those who keep their scientific identity secret, is that of fitting into the social setting under study. Somehow fieldworker and subjects must work out a mutually acceptable position for the former within the everyday existence of the latter. People who suddenly appear in a social setting for the purpose of studying what goes on there amount to a special kind of stranger. They are not merely newcomers who want to become part of the setting and who are likely to accept at face value the nature of things. Field researchers, when they are known scientists, are expected to discover and bring to light aspects of the life-style heretofore unknown or hidden.

Members of the setting are unlikely to welcome or even tolerate in their midst for long anyone who threatens them. The participant-as-observer blunts this initial threat by striving to fit in as soon as possible. The very condition of fitting in means that the researcher has achieved some legitimacy with the subjects, at least enough to pursue his or her scientific aims.

By fitting in the investigator becomes less strange in the eyes of the subjects, but retains nonetheless his or her marginality vis-a-vis the real members of the setting. Indeed, this is another aspect of the problem of fitting in. Getting into the setting is one aspect; one must get close enough to the events and the people to be able to identify and understand them. But, once inside, one must remain sufficiently removed from the setting to be able to analyze it objectively. The fieldworker who successfully fits in succeeds in maintaining his or her marginality throughout the project (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 100).

The problem of fitting in is different for the participant-as-observer-as member and for the participant-as-observer-as nonmember. A member of the setting who decides to conduct field research on that setting has no trouble getting in. This person, however, does face the problem of achieving the proper level of marginality to do valid research. The nonmember, as we have

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seen, is faced with the problem of gaining entry, but has significantly, less trouble maintaining a scientifically proper distance.

Both types of participant-as-observer warrant further study. Since my experience in the field has been almost entirely with the participant-as-observer-as-nonmember type, attention in this paper is restricted to it. Here, from experience in eight field projects, it is possible to draw some conclusions about fitting in[1]. This experience and that of other field researchers demonstrates that, if handled well, nonmember status in the field can produce a detailed set of observations and, eventually, a rich grounded theory of life in the setting.

Two major processes by which the participant-as observer-as nonmember fits into the social setting chosen for study have received only scattered attention in the fieldwork literature. Though sometimes considered under different names, they are treated here as learning and participation. We turn first to learning.

Learning

Learning for the participant-as-observer-as-nonmember is, at bottom, a short course in adult socialization. To fit in means, among other things, to learn the values, lore, codes of behavior, hopes and fears, costs and rwards, sense of involvement (in key situations and over time), and the like of another social world. As John and Lyn Lofland (1984: 38) put it: "The naturalistic investigator ... is 'ignorant' and needs to be 'taught'." My own fieldwork experience suggests that the members of the setting under study are quite willing to do the teaching so long as it is not burdensome or unpleasant. Whether it is burdensome or unpleasant depends on the stance taken toward such learning by the fieldworker.

Teaching a field researcher about life in the setting becomes unpleasant and burdensome when he or she acts like a know-it-all; that is, when he or she cannot step out of the role of professional expert. Stepping out of one's professional role for the purpose of doing field research is difficult:

> The process of attaining intimate familiarity in some realm of life or social setting is a *humbling* experience. One must admit to mere laymen that one is ignorant; one must live with that admission day after day, week after week, month after month.... It is inevitably painful and anxiety provoking to leave the role of Ph.D., Professor, Expert, Teacher, and become a mere student in need of instruction (Lofland, 1976: 14).

Teaching the field researcher can also be burdensom and unpleasant if he or she is naively ignorant of the setting. Except for certain hidden social worlds (e.g., occult groups, remote ethnic communities, high level political circles), a field researcher is expected by the subjects to have a commonsense

understanding of them and their life-style when he or she makes initial contact. In my study of Canadian professional football players, my subjects would have been disconcerted, if not perplexed, had I asked them to tell me the names of the teams in the Canadian Footbal League or to describe the nature of the Grey Cup and how a team gets to play in that game. As a male Canadian, I should know at least that much about my country's second most popular sport.

In short, as a researcher you should "have enough knowledge about the setting or persons you wish to study *to appear competent to do so*" (Lofland and Lofland, 1984: 26). The football players would likely have reasoned that "if this guy is this uninformed about professional football, then how can he ever produce anything of value for us or science." Nonetheless. I was not expected to know about and therefore I was "instructed" in the nature of the tensions during training camp, the feelings towards incapacitating injuries, and the problems of negotiating contracts during the football season.

As mentioned at the beginning, field researchers must try to fit in as soon as possible, for there is normally little tolerance for threatening people at the level everyday relations. This threat diminishes as the researcher becomes acquainted with individual members of the group being observed. With acqaintanceship comes the feeling among those in the group that this newcomer in their midst is now more like them than he or she was upon entry. Being like them means, among other things, that the researcher knows their everyday world as they know it.

In other words, there comes a time in many, if not most, fieldwork projects where the researcher is expected to know and understand the routine more or less as the full-fledged participants do. For the now familiar researcher to ask questions about the routine, would be incongruent with the members' views of this person. Such questions would likely create suspicions about hidden motives or lead members to question the researcher's competence. They are saying, in effect, "Hey, what's the matter with you? You've been around her long enough to know the answer to that."

Finally, to be treated as a learner by those in the setting, the researcher must appear to be enthusiastic about what they have to say. For the members, informing a fieldworker about their way of life is a voluntary action, which they will undertake only if it is pleasant. In my experience, subjects have generally been eager to tell me about their way of life when I have asked them about it. My interest, however, was never feigned. It has been for me and should be for all field researchers a sincere curiosity about the subjects and their social lives that is present even before we enter the setting. If no such prior orientation exists, then one should seriously consider cancelling the project.

The only act of impression management recommended here is that genuine interest be expressed. It should not be faked. Interest that is actually there in the researcher may have to be expressed when he or she is fatigued or preoccupied with another aspect of the setting. Interest may have to be

expressed about items of information the researcher already knows, just to keep alive the impression among the subjects that tidbits of this sort are always welcome.

Participation

One of the most effective ways of simultaneously expressing genuine interest and putting oneself in the position to learn something is to participate in the affairs of the group. The risks of overparticipation, such as overrapport and abandoning the research project and joining the group – i.e., going native – have already been described (e.g., Miller, 1952; Johnson, 1975; 108). There are many field projects where the researcher must constantly guard against these inclinations. In other projects, however, participation in the central activities of the group may be impossible for the researcher, because he or she must be licensed, have certain complex skills, or be of the proper sex, for example.

Failing an opportunity or a capacity to participate directly, field researchers often seek to fill the role of helper. Here, too, there are risks (Lofland, 1984: 34). One of them is that the help that is needed may be very time consuming. Field researchers studying nursing homes or volunteer social service agencies may run into this dilemma. The time available for any fieldwork project is limited. How much time should one devote to helping, when helping prevents one from collecting data elsewhere in the setting?

But some kinds of help pose no such dilemma. Many natural settings that social scientists might study have institutionalized arrangements for meeting routine needs and solving routine problems. The participant-as-observer-as-nonmember can only help when these arrangements are either inadequate or break down. For instance, while observing the daily practices of an adult amateur baseball team, I fetched the balls hit over the fence during batting practice. When I was unable to do this, a member of the team had to, for the team's supply of balls was limited. This help posed no threat to my observing and was appreciated by the subjects. By contrast, I declined a request to serve as umpire at a practice game with another team; I felt incompetent to fill this role at the level of play in the league.

The help just described required no skill, only empathy for the players' needs at practice. As fieldworkers learn more about the settings they are observing, as they get socialized into them, they can offer help based on acquired knowledge. Turning again to my own experience, I found that, after I had observed several months of studio performances, public shows, and informal practice sessions, I began getting requests to criticize the acts of individual entertainment magicians. They believed (with some justification) that I had been around long enough to know "good magic" from "bad magic" and to be able to spot the latter when asked to do so.

Sometimes a researcher's acquired knowledge is less technical than it is social; that is, he or she develops an understanding of "how things work" in

the social world of the subjects. For example, it was only after the university football team that I was observing played a game on a muddy field that I became aware of a major problem: When a field is muddy the cleats on the players' shoes become clogged to the point where the players lose traction. I discussed the problem with the equipment manager and the coaches and was told there there was no effective solution. Eventually, I was able to propose my own which, though less than perfect, was better than anything they had come up with to that point. The solution – scrape the accumulated mud away with the tines of a hand-held garden cultivator – was proposed on the basis of my acquired knowledge: Mud between the cleats is hard to dislodge because it becomes caked there. Moreover, it is difficult for a winded player to work long on this part of his equipment, yet he must do so quickly while he and his (offensive or defensive) team are on the sidelines.

At times a researcher is known or believed to have skills, knowledge, or dispositions that can be of use to the subjects. While observing elementary school teachers at work in Jamaica, I was often invited to give a ten to fifteen minute presentation to their pupils on the Island of Newfoundland where I was employed at the time as a university professor. I accepted these invitations, but declined one from a coach of a professional football team to advise him and his players on player motivation. I lack the qualifications to give such advice. Turning to an example of a useful disposition, several members of a junior football team (age range: 18 to 22 years) that I studied felt they could trust me to hold their wallets and keys during practice. Since the lockers in the locker room had no doors, theft of valuables was a recurrent problem.

Gusfield (1955) calls these acts of helping "fieldwork reciprocities." The term implies that the subjects return the favor with information about themselves and their consent to be observed. Sometimes, however, subjects feel as though they owe more than this to the researcher. Such a view can lead to interpersonal complications and threaten to break down the marginality that the researcher is striving to maintain. During my study of amateur archaeologists, I learned enough about research in that discipline to do some minor, supervised excavating and surveying on weekend outings with members of the local society. Subsequently, I interviewed one of them who defined the occasion as a personal privilege for him. The privilege of being interviewed along with the help I had given to his organization in the field should be repayed, he felt with an afternoon-length demonstration of flintknapping for me and my family. Fortunately for the marginality requirement, my occupational and domestic commitments made it impossible for me to accept this attractive invitation. However, they also frustrated the archaeologist's desire to reciprocate.

Conclusions

The participant-as-observer-as-nonmember who fits in through the processes of learning and participation demonstrates his or her competence to the

subjects of the study. Demonstrated competence is an important condition for rapport, or trust (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975: 46–47). The subjects can see for themselves that the researcher knows them and their social world when he or she can talk to them about and help them with their daily affairs. The researcher who was initially a stranger has left that status to become, so to speak, a friend of the family.

This friend, however, is one with special skills and goals, not merely some hanger-on who has ingratiated his or her way into the inner circles of the group. By fitting in, such as in the ways discussed here, the friend can now be trusted with the delicate job of writing a scientific account of the subjects' social world. They want the portrayal of their world to be accurate, insightful, and understanding. Aspects of the subjects' lives that might appear irrational or immoral to the outside world will escape these definitions if the researcher's write-up is properly sensitive. In other words, when viewed from the inside and skillfully communicated to the outside, "all perspectives and cultures and rational" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 13).

If the researcher fails to fit in during the early weeks and months of the project, the subjects may reason that he or she will write about them in a way that puts them in a bad light. Once this view takes root among the majority of subjects, the group is likely to try to exclude the researcher. If the researcher cannot be physically barred from the scene, then they will ostracize him or her or politely avoid talk about matters of central importance to the study. Of course, the possibility of an inaccurate and perhaps hostile report is increased by such actions. Failure to fit in, then, can set in motion a self-fulfilling prophecy and eventuate in a bad field study and a jaundiced attitude toward the researcher in particular and social science inquiry in general.

Notes

1. These projects are chiefly about amateurs and professionals in art, science, sport, and entertainment. References to them are available in Stebbins (1984). The study of teachers referred to in this article is reported in Stebbins (1975).

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