

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION IN THE ERA OF "ETHNOGRAPHY"

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WHEN EVERETT HUGHES TAUGHT ME at the University of Chicago in the late 1940s, we were trained in Participant Observation (PO), although we also called it fieldwork. We were already aware, however, that PO was an umbrella word covering several combinations of participation and observation and that different combinations were relevant for different studies and study sites.

I was attracted to PO because I saw it as a method I could use to understand parts of American society other than the little bit in which I was personally involved. Later, I realized that it was particularly useful for elaborating, explaining, and even debunking the findings of the quick-and-dirty legwork on which journalists must base their feature stories about American society. Perhaps even more important, PO could supply empirical findings about little known or stereotyped populations, particularly those outside the mainstream.

Partly because of these virtues, the books and articles using PO are often about topics of general as well as sociological interest. When they are also well written, they are sometimes read by the general public. When favorably received and widely read, they are immensely helpful to sociology's reputation, which in turn helps us obtain the resources without which we cannot long survive as teachers or researchers.

PO is still my preferred method. I also consider it the most scientific, because it is the only one that gets close to people. In addition, it allows researchers to observe what people do, while all the other empirical methods are limited to reporting what people say about what they do.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This article has benefited from an extended e-mail conversation with Howard S. Becker about a number of its subjects.



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The rest of this article is mainly concerned with the present and future prospects of PO, and in a time when it has been both subsumed under, and attacked by, "ethnography."

SHORTCOMINGS OF ETHNOGRAPHY

While it is currently alive and well, PO faces a number of obstacles. Over the years, and particularly after the rising influence of postmodernity, this method has been renamed "ethnography" and grouped under that name with a handful of other qualitative empirical methods, as in this journal.¹ While one name is as good as any other as long as the work gets done, this newest umbrella word grows ever wider, however, and now also covers methods that are barely related to PO or in considerable conflict.

This is not the place for a comprehensive analysis of what is under the umbrella, but today, ethnography includes nonempirical and empirical elements. Nonempirical ethnography is dominated by an endless stream of books about PO methodology, which may now even outnumber book-length PO studies. The methodological writings are supplemented by theoretical, and ideological, tracts about reflexivity and related forms of self-knowledge, too many of which proceed from the assumption that they are recent discoveries and ignore that PO has always required reflexivity, or else researchers would lose the rapport without which the research cannot proceed.

A more useful contribution of ethnographic writing is the discussion of rhetorical and other issues of study presentation that had been left out of most previous PO methodology, but these discussions often seem more interested in the literary aspects of narrative theory than in the sociological ones. Moreover, varieties of PO reporting have now sprung up that include, among other things, poetry and fiction—but fiction as the term is defined by novelists, not by epistemologically sophisticated sociologists.

Still, the most drastic change has taken place on the empirical side. Empirical ethnography is now a synonym for virtually all qualitative research except surveys and polls. The ethnography

that most resembles PO seems to be dominated by small studies of exotic sites such as dance halls and strip joints, for which the fieldwork is sometimes mainly an excuse for the researcher to ruminate on how the site felt to him or her.²

The latest form of ethnography, at this writing at least, is "autoethnography," which already comes with its own variations but is basically autobiography written by sociologists.³ It represents not only the climax of the preoccupation with self that is at the heart of too much contemporary ethnography but also the product of a postmodern but asocial theory of knowledge that argues the impossibility of knowing anything beyond the self.

Instead of studying society, some of ethnography's work is devoted to inventing new moral discourses and establishing new research ethics, as well as reporting personal injustice and personal aspects of social injustice and obtaining catharsis and therapy for both researcher and readers. Little attention is paid to the socioeconomic and political aspects of social injustice, however, or to the uses of ethnography for reducing these.

Even if it is well meant and well done, this kind of ethnography has nothing to do with analyzing what people do with and to each other in their groups and networks, or how institutions and communities function and malfunction. Abandoned also is the effort to use sociology and years of intensive field research to report to readers about parts of society about which they know only stereotypes. At times, it is difficult not to suspect that some ethnographers are avoiding the hard work that fieldwork entails, even if not deliberately. Although others are using ethnography as a synonym for autobiography, a few are simply engaged in ego trips, whether or not they know it.

There are four ways to react to the developments I have only sketched above. One way is with a mixture of sorrow and pity, for one must feel sorry for colleagues who paint themselves into such epistemological corners that they cannot conduct empirical studies. I also feel sorry for the ethnographers who want to turn the people they study into friends, and, in some cases, colleagues in suffering.⁴ Once researchers fail to distance themselves from the people they are studying, however, or fail to allow them the same distancing, the rules of qualitative reliability

and validity are sidestepped, reducing the likelihood that sociologists and their work will be trusted by their readers.

My second reaction is fury, because this kind of ethnography has almost nothing to do with research. Too much of it also rejects the epistemological and operational principles of PO, beginning with researcher detachment and ending with systematic analysis.

Moreover, the tone in which the old research principles are rejected and new ones advocated sometimes resembles that of minuscule but shrill social movements. Only the language differs, for despite ethnography's youth, its jargon is already fierce and in some respects even more opaque than the much older sociologese.

Nonetheless, the main shortcoming of this kind of ethnography remains its abdication of sociology's roles in, and responsibilities for, helping people understand their society. The sociologists responsible may also be hurting themselves, for the vacuums they leave will be picked up by pop sociologists, journalists, anthropologists, and others.⁵

A third reaction, to which I am only now getting used, is to realize that for the moment, at least, the new ethnography is here to stay. Indeed, it may satisfy the explorations of and for self, as well as the identity searches that take up so much of undergraduate and, at times even graduate school, learning.

At the same time, ethnography, which once meant the study of peoples, has become, like a number of other disciplinary terms, a virtually undefinable bureaucratic and administrative category (and the aforementioned terminological umbrella) that shelters a variety of unrelated activities. The next step may be Departments of Ethnography.⁶

The fourth reaction is that this form of ethnography is only the latest of the fads and fashions to which intellectual life, like show business, has always been subject—and that like other fads and fashions, cannot last (Whyte 1993, 371). The life stories, poems, and ruminations of most ethnographers are too ordinary to become part of any sociological canon or to compete with the equivalent efforts of essayists and other literati.⁷ In the long run, the only ethnography that will be useful to students

and researchers is that enabling people to learn more about their society.⁸

In the meantime, I reject all attempts at being labeled an “ethnographer,” calling myself, as I always have, a sociologist whose primary research method has been PO.⁹

SOME FUNCTIONS OF ETHNOGRAPHY

As a sociologist, I am also aware that the new developments are not the results of evil spirits or other *Zeitgeisten*, but that whatever the social, emotional, and cultural causes of the rise of ethnography, it is also a nearly perfect adaptation to today’s academic economy. More often than not, ethnographic work can be done by one person, working at home and in bits and pieces between teaching one’s classes—or even in class. This is especially true of autoethnobiography, which should also appeal to undergraduates more interested in understanding themselves than sociology.

Moreover, the ethnographic product can be turned into articles, and if these satisfy the peer review procedures of the relevant journals, the ethnographer can come up with the half dozen or so refereed articles that will win tenure even in many research universities.

In this respect, ethnography is similar to today’s computerized quantitative research, which at the acceptable level of quality required by its peer reviewers, can also produce the number of refereed articles needed for tenure.

Conversely, PO fits less easily into today’s American academic economy. It is very labor intensive and time-consuming; and when the subject is a community or a major institution, it and the book in which the work is reported require a number of years of individual or team work. As a result, it is expensive, both in time and salaries and is virtually impossible to do between meeting one’s classes. It is also hard to report in the extended research report style of sociology’s major journals, as some *ASR* and *AJS* editors who encouraged PO submissions have discovered.

The big problem, however, is money, for PO is costly enough that the major funders of basic sociological research, who almost always have only limited funds to distribute among applicants, can afford to support it only rarely. It is much cheaper to make grants to a dozen quantitative researchers who merely need to pay research assistants and perhaps some machine time than to fund one senior, or even junior, fieldworker for a year or two.

Consequently, much of the funded PO, today as in the past has been conducted in or in connection with public health and medical institutions, which have always received much larger grants than agencies supporting basic research. Today, PO is undertaken to help understand and eliminate politically salient diseases such as drug addiction or AIDs. In the past, the equivalent disease was mental illness, and a number of the now classic PO studies of the post–World War II era were funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, particularly by sociologically inclined program officers such as Leonard Duhl and the late Elliot Liebow. Fieldwork has been valued in many of these institutions to understand and explain the mostly descriptive findings that were collected during years of quantitative research by psychologists and other medical scientists.

Still, perhaps the most important funder, in the post–World War II era, was the G.I. Bill of Rights, for it supplied enough funds for many of us to undertake otherwise unfunded research and writing of theses and dissertations. Unfortunately, it has no contemporary counterpart of equal scope.

THE FUTURE OF PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

PO has always been used by only a few researchers, and funding was never easily available, but its products have always been appreciated, and I am confident that it will continue to exist. New government agencies and private foundations to support it continue to come on the scene, as do new social problems requiring research.

In the past decade, for example, the Russell Sage Foundation has supported PO in the areas of poverty and low-wage labor, and it, together with the Mellon Foundation, as well as the Social Science Research Council, have supported research using PO in immigration research. The policy-oriented evaluation research tradition that began with the war on poverty has also blossomed into opportunities for fieldwork, most recently in connection with homelessness, welfare "reform," and work fare policy.

Finally, POs and their books have always been appreciated. Of the twenty-five books by sociologists that have sold more than 100,000 copies since the 1940s, eight were based mainly on PO; furthermore, POs often become presidents of the American Sociological Association.¹⁰ Should sociology turn its back on PO, it will continue elsewhere, for much of the work in the new urban anthropology, which is mainly undertaken in America, is based on PO.

In addition, investigative journalists have been doing short-term PO for decades, while other journalists, following the path of the late Anthony Lukas (and long before, of some early twentieth-century muckrakers), are writing books based on lengthier PO. In the past decade, journalists have probably published more such books on low-income and ghetto communities than sociologists, although they may be outnumbered by documentary film-makers using their own version of sociological-journalistic PO. For the moment, however, the journalistic fieldworkers have a long way to go before they can match the contributions of sociological PO, and I am enough of a believer in sociology to hope that they will not be allowed to catch up.

NOTES

1. If my recall is reliable, no one at the University of Chicago ever used the term *ethnography*. My fellow graduate students and I called anthropologists doing only descriptive studies ethnologists, but we did so slightly pejoratively, and I do not remember what they called themselves.

2. This is only the published variety that I see in various qualitative journals, including this one.

In all fairness, participant observations (POs) have always gravitated to the study of exotic sites, but when I was in school and we had to limit ourselves, for economic and other reasons, to small studies on small sites, most of the studies dealt with routine, taken-for-granted sites, many of them the sites in which students worked for pay while going to school. Some of these studies were dissertations and included workplaces ranging from taxis to factory assembly lines. Perhaps the most famous is Becker (1951), based on his observations while earning a living as a piano player in Chicago area bars and dance halls.

3. I am indebted to Ellis and Bochner (n.d.) for a comprehensive analysis of auto-ethnography. I should add that in the 1980s, a number of us contributed autobiographies to Berger (1990); but as far as I know, none of the authors thought they were undertaking ethnographic work.

4. I do not remember whether this is another of Everett Hughes's lessons, but even fifty years ago, the rule I used in fieldwork was to be friendly to and with the people you were studying and to form friendships only after the research was done.

5. The appearance of a number of titles forecasting the end of sociology may have something to do with the parallel appearance of ethnography, and a not-so-distant relative, cultural studies.

6. I also work in another bureaucratic category called "communication," which now shelters everything from the study of intrapersonal and interpersonal talk to that of the global mass media.

7. Even as I write, the recent revival of interest in American pragmatism is moving into sociology. Once today's cohorts learn how much timely sociology can be found in the work of John Dewey, this revival may transcend fad and fashion.

8. I am indebted to Howard S. Becker for persuading me of this cheerful assessment of PO's future.

9. I use the word *primary* intentionally, since I have combined fieldwork with interviewing and surveys when the questions I studied called for these.

10. This figure is taken from my study of sociological best sellers (Gans 1997, Table 1) that counted and estimated sales from the 1940s to the end of 1995.

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