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Participant observation as ethnography or ethnography as participant observation in organizational research

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Participant Observation as Ethnography or Ethnography as Participant Observation in Organizational Research

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ABSTRACT

There is a strong tradition of observational research in most areas of the social sciences, especially in Anthropology and Sociology. However, in business and management research observation is often seen as a poor relative to questionnaire surveys and qualitative interviewing. This chapter discusses the use of observational techniques especially for less experienced researchers planning their first major investigation, exploring the difference between participant and non-participant approaches, different techniques of data collection, recording and analysis. Rather than seeking to provide a full guide to conducting participant observation, an impractical task in a single chapter, this offering discusses some of the key issues facing researchers in Business and Management who choose to conduct this sort of research, exploring different approaches to participant observation and some of the ethical and practical challenges associated with the collection and analysis of observational data. The chapter draws on the author's experience of conducting participant observation in organizations with examples of both employee (Sandiford and Seymour, 2002; Seymour and Sandiford, 2013) and customer perspectives (Sandiford and Divers, 2011). It will also draw from 'classic' observational studies such as Mars and Nicod (1984) and more recent examples such as Watson and Watson (2012).

Keywords: Research method, ideology, philosophy, data collection, interpretative,

INTRODUCTION

> The whole development of physical science has been a process of combining theory and observation; and in general every item of physical knowledge – or at least every item to which attention is ordinarily directed – has a partly observational and partly theoretical basis... Thus our axiom that all physical knowledge is of an observational nature is not to be understood as excluding theoretical knowledge. I *know* [emphasis original] the position of Jupiter last night. That is knowledge of an observational nature; it is possible to detail the observational procedure which yields the quantities (right ascension and declination) which express my knowledge of the planet's position. As a matter of fact I did not follow this procedure... I looked it up in the Nautical Almanac. That gave me the result of a computation according to planetary theory... It is the essence of acceptance of a theory that we agree to obliterate the distinction between knowledge derived from it and knowledge derived from actual observation. It may seem one-sided that the obliteration of the distinction should render all physical knowledge observational in nature. But not even the most extreme worshipper of theory has proposed the reverse – that in accepting the results of an observational research as trustworthy we elevate them to the status of theoretical conclusions. The one-sidedness is due to <u>our acceptance of observation, not theory, as the Supreme Court of Appeal</u> [emphasis added] (Eddington, 1958, p. 10-11).

Why Observe?

Direct observation is an integral part of many types of research, indeed as shown in the opening quotation, it is often seen as the most convincing form of evidence (I believe what I can see), although it is often sidelined in the business and management field. It is not always clear why this is the case, although the preponderance of questionnaire survey and interview studies in the literature could suggest that it is often considered more appropriate (perhaps, if more cynically, researchers may consider it easier) to ask research subjects questions about their experiences, attitudes, motivations etc. However, it would probably be foolish to ignore the methodological advantages of observation for many investigations into human areas of activity. Certainly researchers in other fields cannot really avoid observation of one form or another; researchers could hardly ask atoms and molecules (physics, chemistry), weather systems (meteorology), animals, plants (biology) or long dead people (history) why they behave the way they do/did; of course, positivist researchers in the natural sciences have long recognized the significance of observation within experimental design with observation formally preceding and following, and, more informally during experimental interventions. However, despite the obvious advantages of being able to ask questions of our research subjects, we do need to be aware of the limitations of resultant data – it is clear that all questionnaire/interview data are perceptual to some extent, something that often seems to be ignored when reporting research involving hypothesis testing. Asking a customer about a purchasing behavior will inevitably result in partial data affected by such factors as imperfect memory, influences of mood, post-purchase experiences, interviewer impact, questionnaire design and question/item wording, possible intentional distortion of events (lying) etc. It would be unreasonable to expect subjects to recall and explain all such influences in a retrospective interview or questionnaire survey. Behaviorist researchers focus their attention on avoiding such issues by experimental design involving careful control of variables, rather than asking questions of their interview subjects while phenomenologists embrace them as enriching a co-constructed understanding of the world, while participant observers seek to be actively present and “[b]y observing and reflecting on what he/she is observing, the researcher may capture service innovation activities [or other organizational phenomena] and issues that are taken for granted by the team members, and thus would never surface in a retrospective interview” (von Koskull & Strandvik, 2014, p. 144).

There is a long and rich tradition of observation in the social science literature, much of it involving some level of fieldworker participation in the research context. Certainly, much of the observation research conducted in business and management has a tendency towards some level of participation. The positivist ideal of objectivity and researcher separation from the observed is often difficult if not impossible in this sort of context, unless using non-intrusive tools such as hidden camera equipment. The stereotypical image o f a time-and-motion researcher observing workers with stopwatch and clip-board is a clear example of a low-level type of participation (certainly it could not be seen as unobtrusive) albeit less obviously than ethnographic fieldworkers. This chapter explores the value and practice of observation, and participant observation in particular, as a data collection technique for organizational based research. It draws on my own personal experiences conducting and supervising students utilizing participant observation in organization settings. To differentiate these from other examples given in the literature, short boxed excerpts will be included from my own research publications. The next section seeks to define and conceptualize participant observation from, especially focusing on different types and levels of participation and their relative advantages and limitations. This then develops into a discussion of the practicalities and challenges of conducting observational research and analyzing the resultant data. I should note here that a single chapter cannot hope to provide a full and balanced account of why and how researchers can engage in participant observation; rather it provides a personalized perspective, albeit based on relevant literature and personal experience. I will focus on what I have found to be important and challenging methodological issues, often framed around apparent paradoxes, rather than striving to give ‘the whole story’ of this method.

CONCEPTUALIZING PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Participant Observation as Ethnography: Ethnography as Participant Observation?

As with other areas of research, the terminology and jargon of participant observation can be confusing. For example, some researchers seem to use participant observation as a synonym for ethnography (it is also used more or less interchangeably with 'fieldwork' in social research as well). Without getting too involved in a methodological discussion of ethnography here, it is probably sufficient to see ethnography as an approach to or strategy for research (or a methodology), while participant observation is a specific technique used to collect data. However, researchers planning to conduct participant observation would be well advised to explore the ethnographic literature, if only because this is the primary data collection technique of the ethnographer. For example, Spradley's (1980) readable text entitled "Participant Observation" also reads as an introduction to ethnographic fieldwork more generally. His introduction sees this as "participating in activities, asking questions, eating strange foods, learning a new language, observing play, interviewing informants and hundreds of other things" (Spradley, 1980, p3), with most of these activities representing participatory elements of the research, while the observation element is about trying to watch, record and make sense of these experiences. The idea that participation involves activities beyond observation is further complicated by the apparent inclusion of interviewing. Certainly, it would be almost unthinkable for an observer to participate in a social situation without engaging in conversation with other participants, and such conservations are very likely (almost inevitably) to involve some sort of informal interviewing from time to time, with the fieldworker asking about an observed and/or shared phenomenon. Thus, participant observation could also be seen as 'observation +', with participation effectively seen as a means of attempting to make sense of and contextualize observed data.

Taking part in the observed social group (whether a village, neighborhood or work organization) has two key elements in itself and these are not always easy to separate analytically. Firstly, participant observers tend to be physically and socially close to their research subjects/participants, something that enables probing questioning when seeking explanations of phenomena observed. Thus, interviews (both formal and informal) can more readily be about shared phenomena and experiences rather than 'stand-alone' interviews. Secondly, observers actually experience many (and the level and depth of these is closely linked to the time spent in the field and approach to participation) of the socio-cultural experiences that they are researching first hand. As Spradley (1980, p. 51) points out, "participation allows you to experience activities directly, to get a feel of what events are like, and to record your own perceptions", essentially personalizing the research for the researcher (something that positivists who seek objectivity and separation of researcher from researched would be very uncomfortable with). However, this approach to research is very similar to the way humans learn in social situations; it could be argued that we are all conducting participant observation of a kind when we learn to live in society – we are likely to consider that living and working in a new culture is a very effective way of learning about it. Thus, fieldworkers seeking to understand customer experience or the demands of working in a particular job can, to some extent, actually experience these themselves; a researcher investigating an organization's formal induction program for new staff and/or informal socialization processes can go through these in person. A useful way of thinking about this is to see the fieldworker not just as collecting data, but recognizing that "it is the researcher who is the main instrument of social investigation" Burgess (1984, p. 79). So, rather than questionnaires or interviews as instruments, by participating, the observer actually takes on this role in person. Such a view suggests that participant observation is necessarily a duality, as Taylor (2006, p. 85) suggests "a pair of essentially inseparable things – 'two sides of the same coin' perhaps," or even multiple possible dualities, such as observer-member (participant); colleague-researcher; customer-researcher; investigator-as-instrument etc.

Observers who participate; participants who observe.

As suggested above, the level, type and approach to participation plays a significant role in the research project. Different researchers have suggested models of differing types and levels of participation during fieldwork. Junker's (1960) typology, developed and popularized by Gold (1958) is often cited in the literature, based on a continuum from *complete observer* (who "attempts to observe people in ways which make it unnecessary for them to take him into account", 1958, p. 221) through to *complete participant* (who fully joins the group/culture being studied). Along this continuum he suggests two conceptual increments of *observer as participant* and *participant as observer*, each suggesting an emphasis on either participation or observation. It is significant that

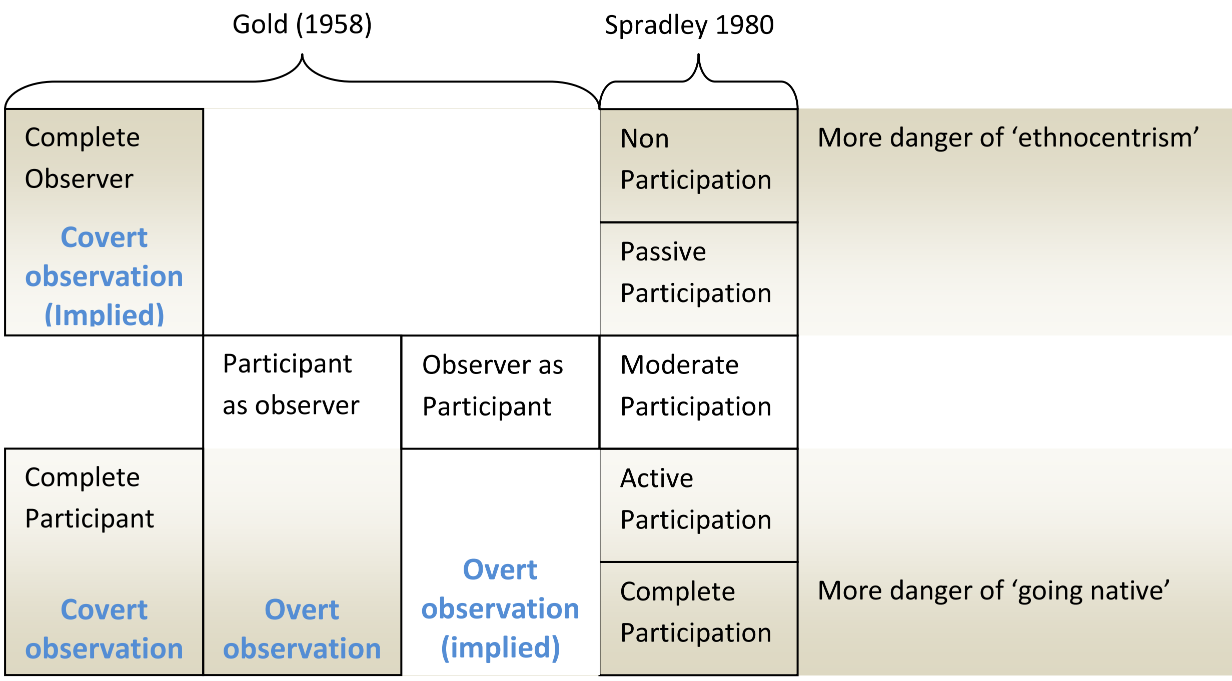
Gold (1958, p. 219) stresses that "[t]he true identity and purpose of the complete participant in field research are not known to those whom he [sic] observes" and that participant as observer is "similar" in role, but without any pretence. Thus, the type/level of participation is similar for both, only differentiated by whether the fieldwork is overt or covert. In addition to this, the observer as participant is also narrowly defined, though not in terms of any pretence or not; rather, it is specified as "one-visit" data collection, involving more "formal" observation and interviews (1958, p. 221). Based on these definitions, the majority of research involving participant observation seems likely to fall into the participant as observer category, partly due to the likelihood of much covert research being discouraged by increasing expectations/requirements regarding informed consent by universities and publishers, and partly due to a recognition that very short-term fieldwork is likely to be rather superficial, lacking the richness depth of longer-term studies.

Popular as this model is, Spradley's (1980, p. 58-62) participation types seem to be a little more nuanced and analytically sensitive, not least because it is not limited the overt-covert issue outlined above. His approach is also based on a scale including:

- *non participation*, normally requiring some sort of separation from the observed individuals, perhaps watching video recordings or televised activities;
- *passive participation* where the observer is present in the field, but avoids interaction as far as possible, perhaps acting as a shadower;
- *moderate participation* involves rather more interaction with other actors/participants in the field, perhaps involving a slight change over time, with passivity being overcome by taking part in some of the activities observed;
- *active participation* occurs when the fieldworker actively seeks to do and experience what the observed people are doing, perhaps seeking to learn a skill associated with that group in order to seek greater understanding (first hand);
- *Complete participation* tends to occur when ethnographers research a context that they already participate in, turning their own "ordinary situations in which they are members into research settings" (1980, p. 61).

Here, the types of participation are somewhat more subtle, for example, *non participation* and *passive participation* both seem to be included in the *complete observer* role as Gold's definition implies that presence in the field is possible without participation if observation is covert and with a conscious effort to avoid any interaction (hence including *passive participation*). The key apparent difference to the *complete participant* here seems to be intent; he specifically links these to two particular dangers of fieldwork, namely "going native" if the fieldworker "incorporate[s] the [participant] role into his self-conceptions and achieve self-expression in the role, but find he has so violated his observer role that it is almost impossible to report his findings" (1958, p. 220); he defines the second danger as "ethnocentrism", or the opposite of going native, "whenever a field worker cannot or will not interact meaningfully with an informant" (1958, p. 222) and is in danger of ignoring the informant/research participant's perspective.

Figure 1: Fieldworker roles



Another advantage of the latter model is an apparent acknowledgement that participant observers can move along the scale (in either or both directions) as their fieldwork emerges and develops. It presents a more flexible and sensitive typology that allows for fluid and changing roles without the apparently rather narrow covert-overt focus Gold's (1954) definitions. For instance, Spradley's variation of complete participation may or may not be covert. Indeed, any of Spradley's roles could be either overt or covert while presenting a rather more conceptually sensitive model for researchers to use, especially when reflecting on their own fieldwork planning and experiences and seems to be more helpful in identifying any shifts in their roles during fieldwork.

Figure 1 provides a comparison of the two models that demonstrates differences in emphasis and apparent conceptual overlapping of Gold's (1958) categories, highlighting the apparent issues of field relations from an ethnocentric/going native perspective and indicating the covert/overt divide; this issue will be explored more later in the chapter.

The above discussion may at first seem rather fussy and lacking in significance. However, it has considerable implications for any fieldworker. As with many aspects of research, there is a certain tension between the methodological pulls of research demands/requirements. Peberdy (1993, p. 55) points out that "the participant observer is attempting to combine both involvement and detachment" and this separation of roles is very challenging, if indeed it is possible at all. This is often seen as a key limitation of, or at least a challenging dilemma of the technique. Bourdieu (2003, p. 281-282) agrees that the

> "inherent difficulty of such a posture has often been noted, which presupposes a kind of doubling of consciousness that is arduous to sustain. How can one be both subject and object, the one who acts and the one who, as it were, watches himself acting? What is certain is that one is right to cast doubt on the possibility of truly participating in foreign practices, embedded as they are in the tradition of another society and, as such, presupposing a learning process different from the one of which the observer and her dispositions are the product; and therefore a quite different manner of being and living through the experiences in which she purports to participate".

Although the decision about participation must fit the researcher's philosophical orientation and specific research questions, it will also inevitably be influenced by practicality. Such practicality will relate closely to the setting being researched – for example, a researcher setting out to investigate the work of a lawyer overtly by observing lawyers at work in their natural setting, would find it difficult to do so as a *full participant* observer unless qualified and working as a lawyer already. Thus access to the field would be dependent partly on the legal/occupational context (requiring qualifications and professional membership to practice) and partly on finding a law firm prepared to cooperate in such a study. An alternative, may be to observe by shadowing; Mcdonald (2005) does see such shadowing as somewhat different to participant observation as it tends to focus on a single observed person. It could also be argued that it is in the shadower's interest to avoid participating in the observed's activities to avoid contaminating the setting. However, it seems that a certain level of participation is inevitable, no matter how unobtrusive the fieldworker strives to be. Even this divide is not always straightforward. For example, when discussing his own study of hotel general managers, Jauncey (1999, p. 194) described a certain fluidity of fieldwork that "involves a constant and often unintended movement between" different types of participant observation; his plan was to undertake "indirect participant observation" by shadowing his managers, but as much of this occurred in public areas of their hotels, he found himself being approached by guests who assumed he was a member of staff and on occasion he found himself switching "to direct involvement in the work of the operation."

Another option could be to incorporate more than one approach in order to provide an alternative perspective. For example, while researching cashier's emotions at work Rafaeli (1989) conducted fieldwork in supermarkets, initially observing unobtrusively while acting as a customer and without the cashiers' explicit consent. Later in the research, the observation became more participatory when she actually trained and worked as a cashier for the same company, potentially balancing Peberdy's (1993) opposing requirements of involvement and detachment. Martin (2014) also conducted both participant and non-participant observations in her study of "hidden labor" amongst migrant women in the US; she "helped with administrative work, made phone calls, helped to organize a health fair and researched grant and funding sources" and pointed out that

> "the volunteer strategy [i.e. the participation as a volunteer] was beneficial in terms of my research goals, as it allowed me to see activities conducted by staff members that are not part of official programs or events. The informal, day-to-day interactions of staff and clients held a great deal of interest for me; in these 'ordinary' encounters of clients and staff, the mission of the organization is negotiated and mediated" (Martin, 2014, p. 19).

Thus, although active participation may not always be possible due to practical concerns, it is likely that if such participation is possible, in Martin's case as a volunteer and in Rafaeli's case as a trainee cashier, aspects of the organization, occupation and stakeholder experience were likely to be more discernible, partly through personal experience (happening to the observer) and partly through a greater level of access to the researched setting and participants.

When considering the type and level of participation, it can also be useful to assess your relative 'nativeness'; Narayan's (1993) analysis drew attention to the value and dangers of conducting fieldwork in an environment that the fieldworker is familiar with (i.e. native to). Certainly, there are advantages and disadvantages to holding preconceived ideas about and bias towards the research setting; familiarity may ease access and help overcome initial barriers to entry, for example, as suggested earlier, it is likely to be very difficult for a non-lawyer to gain access to observe in a law firm, while over-familiarity with a setting may well 'breed contempt', however unintentionally. Native fieldworkers are probably more likely to struggle to attain the openness to experience, or contextual naivety, that is so important for effective observation – possibly missing mundane (to them) phenomena, due to prior socialization into the environment and perhaps even lack the legitimacy of researcher with other fieldworkers (if other participants perceive the fieldworker more as a colleague than a researcher they may be less responsive to informal interviewing during fieldwork). In my own ethnography of public houses (pubs) I explored this:

> Certainly, with considerable prior experience in pub work the fieldworker should be considered as … a native ethnographer with some existing knowledge of this type of environment. Quite apart from any such bias or research error, the influence of the participant observer on the individuals and culture studied is also an issue in the study of people. Although ethnographers should seek to minimise any such influence or impact, it seems unreasonable to expect that such participation can avoid at least some such "reactivity" (Hammersley 1992, p. 163).
>
> Care must also be taken by researchers conducting participant observation, especially when defining the field-worker's role in the society studied. Reinharz (1997, p. 5) identified a number of

researcher selves, each of which has a particular type of influence when in the field. These selves were categorised in three areas: “Research based selves,” – relating specifically to the research role (e.g. being an observer); “brought selves” – which are more personal and provide a sense of individuality; and “situationally created selves” which may or may not be related to the research project (e.g. being a temporary member of the studied group). When reading the field notes it was often possible to identify when specific selves had dominance over others. There were times when the situationally created self as a member of bar staff was predominant, especially when dealing with either difficult or ‘good’ customers (or colleagues) or at busy times when work demands could sometimes take temporary precedence over observation.

Such dangers of participant observation are well documented, and require consideration by fieldworkers. Questions of fieldworker role identification are relevant here. For example, is the predominant role observation or participation (observer-as-participant or participant-as-observer)? It may be rather presumptuous for an ethnographer to claim to take only one or the other role type throughout the fieldwork experience, much as it is difficult to clearly delineate which ‘selves’ are dominant at any one time. This is where a reflexive approach to writing ethnography can help both writer and reader

(Sandiford, 2004, p. 99).

The idea of reflexivity is introduced in the excerpt as a possible tool to explore the roles and *selves* of the participant observer. Such an idea is widely recognized as a key factor in doing and reporting qualitative research in general. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p. 16) explain that reflexivity “implies that the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer on them” and that, inevitably “the particular biography of the researcher” will influence their data collection, analysis, interpretation and conclusions. Although this is probably so for all social researchers, whatever their philosophical orientation, it is perhaps especially so for participant observers, due to that intentional participation in the research context and the idea of self-as-instrument, raised earlier, that clearly accentuates the reflexive nature of the research. Thus, it is of considerable importance that fieldworkers should recognize and explore the reflexive nature of their position in the field and in relation to other participants. However, any resultant categorization of role/self is rarely simple. For example, Rafaeli’s (1989) “unstructured” observation, when posing as a customer, could indeed be perceived as “unobtrusive” by seeking to avoid attracting attention. However, her presence in the research setting is indeed likely to have some impact on the participants, however minor. Even using video technology would be obtrusive to some extent unless the equipment is hidden and covert, although this has been included in the continuum to identify extremes along the continuum. Similarly, ‘total’ immersion in the field is unlikely to ever be absolutely total, if only because the role of researcher will impinge on the fieldworker’s behavior, otherwise the exercise becomes participation with no focused observation. As Spradley (1980, p. 51) asserts “the ethnographer [or researcher conducting participant observation] can hardly ever become a complete participant in a social situation”, as the necessity of seeing observation as data collection with a purpose (to answer research questions) will always require some distance from the observed group/phenomenon. However, he does suggest that just such a complete participant could develop into or later become a participant observer if s/he chooses to conduct research into the organization or occupation that they participate in. for example Spradley and Mann’s (1975) research in a cocktail bar developed from Mann’s existing employment there, Pierce’s (1995) work on paralegals was inspired by her earlier experience working as a paralegal and my own research into pubs (Sandiford, 2004) was facilitated by a lifetime as customer and employee in licensed premises.

DOING THE OBSERVATION

As with any form of research, the best place to start with any participant observation investigation is the literature. Many books, articles, theses and other publications are available, making the first challenge literature selection – no one could hope to read everything. Because of this, there is a danger of being too focused in your reading; if you are planning to conduct a study of a fast food restaurant do not just read hospitality studies. However different the research context may seem, the key challenges and issues are quite similar in many ways. The literature can be usefully divided into two key types:

First the methodological literature that explores participant observation can provide an invaluable introduction to the philosophies, techniques and critical arguments associated with the method. This can include critical philosophical and methodological discussions (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) and more ‘practical’ explanations and guides to conducting fieldwork (Spradley, 1980). Always try to focus on specialist sources rather than the broad student textbooks that provide a general introduction to research methods.

Second the empirical literature often includes useful insights into and suggestions about the conduct of participant observation. This is not always the case as journals often work to very strict word limits and writing up this sort of research is always demanding within such requirements, often leading to accounts of fieldwork practice being trimmed in favor of data analysis and theoretical discussion. It can be a challenging exercise to find much helpful guidance in such articles, but it is certainly worth exploring such articles for invaluable, often hidden, fieldwork ‘hints and tips’ (and readers should not feel limited to methodology/research design sections for these). For example, O’Connell Davidson’s (2008) gave considerable attention to the issue of informed consent as this was of particular significance to her work exploring the particularly sensitive area of sex work and as will be discussed more later in the chapter, Korczynski’s (2007) paper on factory workers and music in the workplace gives some attention to establishing participant trust as that was seen as particularly significant given the context of his study.

There are numerous examples of book-length accounts of ethnographic work that give detailed and insightful accounts of participant observation. Classic studies such as Whyte’s (1955) can be worth attention. His discussion of fieldwork in an American urban “slum” offers personal insights into the challenges and value of this sort of fieldwork in different kinds of community. Of more obvious relevance to organizational research, books such as Cavendish’s (1982) introduction to her fascinating, if impressionistic, account of her experiences participating with and observing the position of women employed in twentieth century factories. This is a useful example of Spradley’s (1980) category of *complete participation*, as Cavendish’s research started not so much as participant observation, but as a personal decision to seek and experience the life of a factory worker and much of her work was based on her reflections about the experience afterwards. Such monographs may lack some of the scholarly precision and succinctness required by journal editors and reviewers, but they often provide the novice participant observer with insights regarding the conduct of fieldwork that can be lacking in word-limited scholarly articles.

Often the two types of literature do overlap. For example, in his entertaining account of his own research in the Cameroon, anthropologist Nigel Barley (1983) gives a ‘warts and all’ description of the challenges of conducting fieldwork in a very different environment to his own. Early in his book he points out that he plans to give a detailed account of some of the more practical challenges facing researchers conducting this sort of fieldwork in challenging and often alien environments; he explained that he will

> “dwell precisely on those aspects that the normal ethnographic monograph punctuates out as “not anthropology”, “irrelevant”, “unimportant”... this book may, then, serve to redress the balance and show students and, it is hoped, non-anthropologists, how the finished monograph relates to the “bleeding chunks” of raw reality on which it is based, and convey something of the feel of fieldwork to those who have not had that experience” (Barley, 1983, p. 10).

The aspects of anthropological fieldwork (participant observation) that he draws attention to are the day-to-day practicalities and challenges of living and working in an unfamiliar setting for research purposes. He discusses the difficulties of dealing with alien bureaucracies, negotiating access, climate, food and, particularly graphically, diseases. Although few researchers in the field of business and management can expect the same actual experiences as in Nigel Barley’s “mud hut”, the insights of doing participant observation and his interactions with his research participants has a methodological relevance that can rarely (if ever) be found in precisely worded scholarly work subject to strict word-limits, evaluation criteria and academically rigorous reviewers.

In addition to the basic level of participant, discussed earlier, the fieldworker’s role(s) are of considerable importance here; will the participation be as some sort of employee or customer or maybe something in between the two. For example, Bowen’s (2009, p. 1516) study of a group of tourists seems to leave this question open somewhat when he describes the tour group that he participated in as “9 tourist participants plus the tour group leader and the author”. From this, does the reader see Bowen as a tourist (customer) or something else? This also raises the question of how he was perceived by the other group members. In my own research into English pubs, in my first study (Sandiford 2004) I lived with three relatively clear, if not always separable, roles as employee (being a paid member of staff, granted access by senior and unit management), researcher conducting an overt study and, to some at least, student (on one occasion during a rather heated in-service encounter with a chef, he made it clear that students were not his favorite type of human being). However, during most of the fieldwork, it was clear that the employee role was most recognized by other participants given the nature of our interactions. The second study (Sandiford and Divers, 2011) was actually rather more difficult from a personal perspective; taking the role of customer in my local village pubs, I needed to renegotiate (with employers, customers, my co-fieldworker and myself) my position in those places as we both took on our additional role of fieldworker. This was more uncomfortable and challenging than I had expected as an experienced participant observer, mainly because I was beginning to observe *professionally* individuals and places that I was at least partly familiar with before the research began.

Getting started.

One of the key skills of the participant observer is to identify and analyze both the mundane and extraordinary in a given social setting. It may be tempting to focus on and emphasize unusual behaviors, especially when observing relatively familiar settings, such as work organizations in one’s own native land, if only because of a sort of tacit familiarity with the cultural environment; this contrasts with research into very different cultures where the most mundane of activities may seem striking and fascinating to a fieldworker. It could actually be argued that, paradoxically, mundanity may be more significant to people (and researchers investigating their culture/way of life), if only because it is likely to be more representative of the way they live their lives on a day-to-day basis. In order to draw out, analyze and make sense of behavior, whether mundane or not, while actually observing and participating, it is important for fieldworkers to adopt a level of openness to social phenomena whenever possible, striving to avoid making assumptions about phenomena based on preconceived ideas. One tool that can help in this process is the keeping of field notes or a field diary/journal. Quite apart from providing a detailed record of the participant observation based on “relatively concrete descriptions of social process and their contexts” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 175) the writing (and rereading) of field notes can help to uncover and reflect on what has been observed and experienced, revisiting the day’s (and previous days’) events[1]. Indeed, Okely (1992, p. 16) suggests that participant observers learn “through the verbal, the transcript [and] through the senses” striving to develop a “total knowledge”. She goes on to point out that field notes contribute to this as an additional data source, as they may “be no more than a trigger for bodily and hitherto subconscious memories” implying that thorough field notes can when analyzed serve as more than a record of observations, also potentially triggering deeper memories of an experience, acting as a sort of catalyst for insight. An example of this is given below, where revisiting more descriptive field notes contributed to conceptual development after the event, even to the extent that I incorporated literature that I was familiar with from my proposal development and fieldwork preparation (the blue text is quoted verbatim from the field notes).

… the following was written after a rather busy evening

For some reason I was on a real high all evening – something I hadn’t experienced here yet (although I’m usually happy enough) perhaps because I got a real buzz from being busily active. It was quite demanding to keep up at times, with a number of demands at the same time. You don’t get much chance to chat with anyone, but most of the customers acknowledge that you’ve got other demands on your time. Even so there are opportunities to pass a few comments with some of the customers, locals or residents, and the atmosphere is more fun and energetic. I do enjoy the occasional

[1] The use of fieldnotes is discussed further in the next section.

quiet talk with a small group of drinkers or diners, but there is less feeling of doing something, it's more like 'professional socialising'. When you're busy with colleagues running around like headless chickens it always seems more fun, like a party.

This was written early in the second period of fieldwork, and the weekly reflections returned to the issue, considering why this sort of experience is pleasurable:

Rereading about Wednesday's "buzz" made me think a bit. It reminds me of the pleasure and satisfaction of holding a dinner party for friends. I'd insist on doing all the cooking and it'd all have to be "just so". This'd mean that I'd generally miss out on lots of the conversation, running about cooking, but I'd still be able to snatch some chat along the way, joining in for a couple of minutes, dashing off and then catching up later on. The technical side is good – getting everything organised; the social side is good – catching up with friends; the sense of achievement is good – making my friends happy. In a sense what happened on Wednesday was a temporary intensification of or "speeding-up" of service work with elements of emotion work – the idea that quantitatively intensifying professional socialising requires a different type of emotion management or emotional labour to the more common pub relationship. It can be great in small doses, but I wouldn't want to keep that level of effort up for too long!

Work satisfaction is often more apparent at such times, despite the impracticality of offering levels of service and attention to individual customers that were also referred to in interviews as being important sources of what Tolich (1993, p. 368) would probably call "stressful satisfaction". This does seem somewhat at odds with a considerable portion of the literature that sees the quantity of emotion management or emotional labour as more stressful and likely to result in more chance of emotional exhaustion. Perhaps this is because such busy periods were not excessive and staff would be unlikely to be constantly 'buzzing'. Morris and Feldman (1996) did point out that interactive work that was especially emotionally intense and of longer duration are more likely to have adverse effects, while in the pub environment emotional intensity was often less possible when very busy. Even if a single customer was being difficult

(Sandiford, 2004, p. 206)

Asking other participants for explanations is another key part of the process, rather than attributing observed behaviors with the fieldworker's own cultural mores. However, this is not without its practical issues, especially as

other participants may occasionally be bemused by the apparently naïf questioning of an ethnographer, especially … [if the fieldworker is known to have] prior work experience in the type of work that they are engaged in (Sandiford, 2004, p. 100).

As suggested earlier, in many ways the practice of participant observation in work organizations can be similar to that of a new employee, apprentice or student intern gaining work experience, in that both fieldworker and apprentice/intern are likely to be experiencing a particular context for the first time (even if they are familiar with the actual place, the context of work experience or fieldwork add a new dimension), both are (ideally) seeking to learn about that context whether from a fieldwork or employment context and both have a level of what Lave and Wenger (1991) call "legitimate peripheral participation", at least an overt fieldworker with negotiated access does. This concept seems particularly pertinent to the participant observer on many levels; we could see the legitimacy of both as being related to being formally accepted by other participants as members, whether temporary or permanent. However, the idea of legitimacy can go further in that both are recognized as learners/researchers (i.e. novices with an intention to learn for a particular purpose – interns seeking work experience, apprentices learning occupational expertise and fieldworkers seeking to answer specific research questions) – this is particularly important to enable them to ask the often naive sounding questions necessary to learn about how things are done and why they are the way they are. The peripheral nature emphasizes the different type of membership that both have within the social group – both 'belong' as a special type of member, but both are inevitably peripheral to the core, group of full members; and of course, both necessarily participate in at least some aspects of the everyday life of the social group. This sort of legitimized peripheral participation is quite common in the participant observation/ethnographic literature on organizations. For example Korczynski (2007, p. 259) explained how

> "Because I was not a normal worker (and also because I was not being paid for my labor by the firm [peripheral]), I had some latitude [legitimization] to walk around the shop floor and talk with people [participate and observe] beyond the immediate milieu of my worktable" [annotations added].

This also highlights the challenge of achieving access to an organization for the participant observer. Korczynski's participant role was that of overt, unpaid worker, negotiated with management and legitimized with his colleagues by his academic position. However, as suggested earlier, other researchers are likely to find it more challenging to gain access to work-participant roles due to barriers to entry into particular occupations. Thus, to take up a work role in an occupation (or organization) with higher barriers to entry, some level of qualification or professional status may be required in addition to negotiated organizational access. For example, Pierce's (1995) study of paralegals was, at least partly facilitated by her experience as a paralegal earlier in her own career, while without the required legal qualifications and professional membership it is unlikely that she would have been able to conduct participant observation as a lawyer. Pierce's study is particularly interesting methodologically as she highlights how participant observation was conducted almost as a methodological compromise. She explains how she originally planned to conduct more unobtrusive observation with minimal, if any, participation. However, she found it impossible to gain access to any law firms as a researcher and it was clear that potential gatekeepers were concerned with the implications of her study for a number of reasons. As a result, she decided to take a more participatory approach and become "a covert fieldworker" (Pierce, 1995, p. 19), gaining formal employment as a paralegal herself and keeping her fieldwork secret from her employer – in this case the level of deception is rather blurred as she was open with her role of research student and her research topic (paralegals' occupational stress) and she did conduct overt interviews; it was only the participant observation that was covert. She does discuss the ethics of this approach, essentially concluding that "there was more to be gained than lost from a study of this kind" (1995, p. 19).

It is also important to recognize that participant observation is "a strategy for both listening to people and watching them in natural settings" (Spradley, 1979, p. 32). Ethnographers are particularly focused on the need to collect data in such natural settings rather than conducting experiments in artificial environments that inevitably lack context of socially complex settings or surveying (by interview or questionnaire) research subjects away from the context/place of interest to the researcher. This is based on a need to "achieve access to the native's point of view" (Narayan, 1993, p. 672) and this can be obscured if the fieldworker cannot move beyond her/his own cultural lens. So there will inevitably be a certain tension between trying to find the native's way of understanding the world and interpreting this from a scholarly, theoretical perspective.

Watson and Watson (2013) suggest an additional aspect of fieldwork that adds an additional nuance to the models of participation/observation presented earlier. During their research into pubs, they recognized that other types of participation affected their investigation and provided additional sources of insight. They explained that, although their formal fieldwork took place in and around the pubs themselves, they were aware that these pubs need "to be understood as part of the society of which they are a part" and that

> "This has meant treating our own daily lives in our home society as part of the research territory over which we have ranged. It has been done by our acting as 'everyday' participant observers in our own society, recognizing that public houses and the narratives relating to them are part of the mundane, day-to-day functioning of our society"

They link this idea of being 'everyday participant observers' with 'everyday ethnography' rather than purely 'organizational ethnographers', leading them to

> "take note of every occasion in their daily life when such matters come to their attention, so we have taken note of how friends, neighbours, strangers on trains, newspaper writers, people in public houses, characters in television programmes, and so on, speak about pubs." Watson and Watson (2012, p. 686).

Thus, they draw from any relevant sources of data and evidence about their research area, drawing on the ethnographic principle of immersion within the society/culture being researched. So, as traditional ethnographers engaging in participant observation overseas, would observe and participate in many different aspects of 'native' life whatever their focus, organizational fieldworkers would benefit from this everyday participant observation rather than separating the formal *field* from the rest of their life when it takes place in the societal context of the organization being studied. This is essentially similar to the idea that an ethnographic fieldworker researching religion in a distant culture would not only participate and observe in and around the local temple, but would seek data relevant to the religious life of the society in other parts of the community's daily life. This is likely to be a challenging position to take in a fieldworker's own *natural environment*; whereas a fieldworker living and researching in an unusual place may be more attuned to everyday mundanity if only because of a general contextual strangeness.

What to observe; how to observe; what am I looking for?

As with any other type of research, participant observation needs to be guided by clear research questions and objectives. However, unlike more positivist approaches to research, such questions can evolve during the fieldwork, emerging from observational data over time. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p. 29) point out that "the aim of the pre-fieldwork phase (planning) and in the early stages of data collection is to turn the foreshadowed problems into a set of questions to which an answer can be given". The implication here is that the actual practice of *doing* participant observation contributes to the honing and focusing of research questions; they go on to suggest that sometimes "the original problems are transformed or even completely abandoned in favour of others" (1995, p. 29). The following excerpt illustrates how revisiting descriptive notes can inspire reflective analysis, insight and further questions relating to the research topic. In this case, the topic of emotions in the workplace was developed in relation to a particular encounter with a customer (especially in relation to humor and anger) while raising the issue of forms of address that could then be explored more fully. Again, blue text indicates field note material.

...this is the record of the first time the fieldworker served a regular customer referred to as 'the General' who was obviously becoming a little senile:

I did have one interesting customer – an old guy who had been in each day. Later I found out that all the others know him and he's the 'General' and who could be a miserable sod (I could have worked that out for myself!) Our first conversation:
"Are you going to fill this? [indicates empty ½ pint jug on bar]"
"Certainly sir. [he looked like a 'sir'] What did you have in it?"
"Speak up, I can't hear you!"
"What would you like?"
"Don't be so bloody stupid. What does everyone drink in England?"
"But what type of beer would you like?"
"I don't bloody know! Anything!"
"Would Directors be OK?"
"Yes, anything."
(Service)
"£1.13 please."
"Help yourself. [cash on bar] Why is it more than last time?"
"Our beers have different prices and I didn't know what you had last time."
"[disgruntled Cough]"

It's very difficult to get angry with such bad customers as they are so ridiculous and funny. After he'd left the customers on either side of him breathed big sighs of relief with amazed comments like, "Misery guts has finally gone!"

In a relatively short entry the content and flavour of the interaction was captured and available for fuller reflection, analysis and 're-experience' when time allowed. This excerpt contains a variety of ideas that were discussed in earlier findings' chapters in the thesis. Especially noticeable is the coping mechanism (hardly a planned strategy) of being amused by customers and situations that may otherwise inspire anger or frustration. It is perhaps significant that 'in the heat of the moment' when recording the encounter the idea that "it's very difficult" to lose your temper. This does not suggest that the fieldworker was trying to be angry, but seems to be a rhetorical device written to 'self' to stress the idea that anger was the last thing in mind at the time. But the very act of mentioning the concept could be seen as 'protesting' too much?

Another personal observation alluded to during the passage is the form of address – the minor aside "he looked like a sir" has implications for the study. How does an employee judge which approach each customer expects? In the individualistic pub environment many such customer analyses are carried out by staff. The concept of using honorifics to depersonalise encounters was referred to earlier in the thesis as a coping strategy, and the fieldworker did find himself using 'sir' and 'madam' more than in previous working environments. He was often more cautious with 'mate' and other informal terms as forms of address, partly because of the nature of the Coaching Inn Company, and partly as a response to the habits of colleagues (being socialised by imitation). However, the value of the technique was obvious in some situations with difficult or unpleasant customers.

(Sandiford, 2004, p. 240-241)

This emergence/development of research questions during data collection and analysis ties in with the big questions about any form of observation, especially 'what am I actually looking for? As observational data are collected over-time, this sort of study rarely seeks the sort of snap-shot provided in cross-section research; rather it builds up a rich database that can be seen as developmental and growing in focus (Spradley, 1980). This may not be longitudinal in intention (i.e. not seeking to identify trends, changes etc over time), though it will often be so in effect. Fieldworkers often describe long periods of data collection; anthropologists can spend many years living in a studied community or return to it many times for further data collection. However, most organizational studies are rather shorter in length, with examples measured in days rather than months or years (e.g. Bowen's 2008 study involved participant observation of a 14 day tour). Despite this, it is clear that intensive, participatory research, also referred to as *compressed* ethnography (Jeffrey and Troman, 2004, p. 538) like this will potentially provide a large number of phenomena to observe and make sense of. This is not to suggest that shorter studies are inferior to longer ones, especially when they, as with Bowen's work, focus on a necessarily time-delimited phenomenon such as an escorted tour or a specific organizational event. Indeed, this sort of investigation can often provide a particularly rich and deep data set if the intensity of the event/phenomenon is reflected adequately in the field record; because of this, such work does not necessarily fall into Gold's (1958) *observer as participant* category discussed earlier, as the intensity of participation does not really fit with the superficiality implied by his definition of the type of one-visit fieldwork he describes.

Perhaps one useful way of conceptualizing phenomena from a participant observer's perspective is through the mundane-extraordinary divide introduced earlier. It is likely that much of what is and can be observed will be (or become) relatively mundane or ordinary which may encourage the fieldworker to ignore this and seek out extraordinary (interesting, striking) phenomena to focus on. However, this may well be rather misguided, especially in a familiar setting (e.g. in the case of a native fieldworker or someone who has been collecting data for a long period of time). Paradoxically, it is likely that research questions seeking to understand organizational (or community) behaviors, mores, values etc would be better answered by focusing on the mundane, everyday, taken-for-granted aspects of that organization. So, an investigation into an organization's culture would need to explore and analyze day-to-day routines as much as the more highly visible periodic rituals. Schaffer (2000, p. 1) presents us with another paradox here, suggesting that mundane behavior can help us "recapture the extraordinary essence of our everyday lives". He suggests that focusing on the extraordinary can be hugely distorting. He uses the example of a hypothetical Martian anthropologist researching Humanity and basing its conclusions wholly on extreme behavior, especially that depicted by the popular and news media, who would be likely to "leave this planet thinking that we're a bunch of freaks" (Schaffer, 2000, p. 2). Although this assertion could seem to lack a certain scholarly balance, notably the comment about freaks, the point is important; after all, initially the Martian anthropologist would not know which behavior mundane and which extraordinary and the two types would both require investigation in order to be able to categorize them as such. The problem with a human or already socialized being would be that the mundane is more likely to be taken for granted and even left out of the analytic processes.

As suggested in the previous section, an integral part of the data collection is the recording of actual observations; a participant observer's field notes are not wholly descriptive of observations made, but are likely to include reflective *and* reflexive commentary in order to maximize the participation.

> The primary type of data for the participant observation was a reflexive field diary recording specific observations and the experiences, thoughts and reflections of the fieldworker. Certainly at the end of the fieldwork this document (or five documents – one for each unit investigated) made up the bulk of the data, despite the numerous interview transcripts. Due to the nature of participating as a full time member of staff it was difficult to write notes during work shifts, thus most of the diary entries were made after each work period. These daily records were largely descriptive, documenting specific observations and thoughts. When more time was available, such as on days off, the writing took a more reflective approach. At such times the fieldworker would reread previous notes and think more deeply about the various issues raised. This exercise helped revisit and clarify various data, as well as planning subsequent data collection (especially relating to more focused observation and interviewing) and analysis...
>
> ... Certainly in this project the field diary was often written in a personal style of shorthand that would be little help for other individuals... Some notes were originally written with word-processing software, while others were wholly or partially written manually with informal annotations and reflections in the margin. As well as recording events and thoughts, and guiding the project's development, these notes provide a useful reflexive resource. The combination of the descriptive and more reflective types of record enabled the fieldworker to recall various aspects of the fieldwork during analysis, including specific observations, personal feelings and thought processes from the time.
>
> (Sandiford, 2004, p. 101-102)

Challenges and issues: negotiating access, informed consent and establishing rapport.

Academic audiences tend to require researchers to discuss the problems or limitations of their work when writing-up their research. It is all too easy to focus on what can be seen as inherent weaknesses (limitations) of a research method or a particular study. However, it is probably more academically healthy to show how a project has addressed research issues rather than assuming an inevitable limitation. The three issues listed above are often seen as just such difficulties or limitations associated with participant observation, however these often seem to be exaggerated and, perhaps, can unnecessarily discourage researchers from this sort of research.

Due to the immersive and interactive nature of participant observation, a number of practical and potentially ethical issues face fieldworkers, not least of which is achieving access. Whether overtly negotiated or covertly sought, the fieldworker needs to gain some level of access to the setting. If conducting insider research, either as an employee or supernumerary, the fieldworker will require access and cooperation at a number of levels, including senior management (head office) middle management (e.g. branch management, team leadership/supervision) and colleague (employee) level. When discussing research ideas with colleagues (and supervisors in particular) it is likely that this will be one of the early concerns; students and novice researchers are often warned that achieving access for participant research can be particularly challenging, especially if researching sensitive issues within a work organization; imagine, for example, how you would feel if a stranger came up to you at work and calmly explained s/he is researching the unethical behavior of employees in your organization and would very much like to observe you in your natural setting for the study! Effective access is often a challenge whatever the research method used – colleagues have often discussed the difficulty they had in finding sufficient interviewees (in interview studies) and very few questionnaire surveys seem to attract sufficient responses to make the relevance of the sample's original randomness sound convincing.

With participant observation it is clear that participation must be possible in some form, so access must be either negotiated as a fieldworker or (probably in fewer cases now than before) achieved through some form of subterfuge, perhaps with total non-disclosure of purpose (e.g. simply applying for a job or acting as a customer) or by somehow obscuring the real purpose (in the example above, the fieldworker would be advised to avoid the explicit and threatening word “unethical” in the request for access), not least, as any covert approach to fieldwork has considerable ethical implications. Although it may be reasonable or even necessary to take such an approach in some cases, it would be essential to ensure scrupulous ethical standards of research practice, a point that is now widely recognized by university ethics committees and academic publishers. Access can often be arranged by prospective fieldworkers if key *gatekeepers* (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), who can facilitate (or not) entry into a research context, are approached sensitively and potential fieldworkers should not be discouraged from seeking it. Indeed, there is a certain paradox that it can sometimes be easier to obtain formal access in very different and sensitive contexts; for example, Punch (1993, p. 183) suggested that being a foreigner was “doubtless an advantage in gaining entry” in his study of Dutch police. He also found that as “a visiting academic, seemingly a bird of passage, whose intention was to publish in English” probably contributed to his ease of access. So, his study participants felt little threat from him. In addition to this, it is likely that his overt role of academic would facilitate a certain legitimization as an observant and enquiring researcher, in the same way that Korczynski (2007, p. 259) overcame suspicion that he could be a “management spy”, when conducting his participant observation by showing his university webpage to participants. This also demonstrates a blurred line between negotiating access and developing rapport and trust; Korczynski certainly had organizational access to the setting and the other participants do not seem to have excluded him from their interactions despite some suspicion, but when that suspicion was allayed, access to their activities and conversations seems to have been enhanced, demonstrating increasing rapport. During my own fieldwork I once faced a similar situation; during the final period of fieldwork with different pubs from a single organization developing rapport and trust with one management couple (Damien and Janine) was particularly challenging. The excerpt below also draws attention to the potential value of longer-term fieldwork in building relationships with participants over time, especially when a simple view of the fieldworker’s university webpage may not be enough:

The researcher was very open about this study and its aims with the staff and customers of the pubs sampled, and generally received favourable and enthusiastic assistance. There was, however, one notable exception to this – the pub manager who was referred to earlier. He was initially convinced that the fieldworker was working as a spy for head office which raised immediate questions as to whether the fieldwork at his unit should continue, in case he was harmed by such concerns. However, after discussing the matter with him, his partner and the fieldworker’s supervisor it was decided to continue. The manager himself explained that he wasn’t worried by the possibility of being spied on as he had nothing to hide. He protested that he was happy for the fieldworker to continue, if only as a source of cheap labour. Thus it was decided to carry on with the research there and monitor progress. By the middle of the fieldwork the manager’s doubts seemed to have been allayed, and his earlier suspicions were treated as a joke by all concerned, making it possible to interview him along with a number of his staff. The change in his attitude towards the researcher and the study can be illustrated by the following excerpt from the field notes from the third week of this phase of fieldwork:

“I finally seem to be feeling like a part of the team. I am getting on much better with Damien[2] (and Janine for that matter) and they seem to be trusting me more. Janine got me to do lock up tonight and didn’t even go round after me checking up as she always did before (the others [colleagues] all have to put up with the same). Things certainly seem to be looking up”.

This showed the advantage of carrying out participant observation over a few weeks, as the relationship that develops between fieldworker and colleagues gives the opportunity to allay any negative feelings about the research and help advance a feeling of trust prior to any formal

[2] All names of research participants have been fully anonymised

interviews. It was also reassuring to observe that the couple's often erratic and untrusting behaviour was equally aimed at other members of staff who had worked with them for much longer than the fieldworker.

(Sandiford 2004, p. 121.122)

This also demonstrates the complexity of negotiating access and trust at different levels; senior management at head office were enthusiastic about supporting the research, colleagues at unit level were also supportive and happy to engage with the fieldworker but, although allowing access, the unit managers were openly suspicious for the first part of the fieldwork, often making their suspicions clear through a sort of joking repartee involving colleagues and customers. It also highlights the challenge of balancing professional and personal ethics with practicality. Although informed consent was obtained, as a researcher, I was responsible to ensure my work did not cause any harm to any participants, including but not limited to, Janine and Damien. In my professional opinion this did not seem to be the case, nor did their expressed attitude necessarily damage the research project at the time. As the fieldwork continued the situation did improve and both did consent to be interviewed and participated (apparently) happily and cooperatively before the research ended.

Kaul (2004, p. 4) presents another aspect of rapport building that is probably not possible in most non participant observation research when he describes how the long term nature of his own fieldwork in a small Irish village. After working (in a local pub) and conducting his fieldwork through the busy tourist season, he observed that at the end of the season, "[a]fter we *didn't leave*, we noticed that people started opening up to us and taking us a bit more seriously" he interpreted this as

> " nature of the tourists, and the *semi*-transient nature of working-tourists, that sometimes they no longer invest intense emotional energy in people unless they stay for longer periods" [emphasis original] (Kaul, 2004, p. 4).

Kaul (2004) also explored the advantages and disadvantages of taking up paid employment during (and as part of) his fieldwork and although he argues that this is not unethical in itself, he recognizes that anthropologists are often uncomfortable doing so. This is only one of the challenging ethical issues relating to this sort of fieldwork. Researchers more used to conducting questionnaire surveys or stand-alone interviews can sometimes be rather wary of formal observation studies, not least because they are guided by the common requirement of ensuring the informed consent of all participants and, as Jauncey 1999, p. 194) pointed out, in some settings (especially those involving public space) "without wearing a sandwich board declaring the research interests, it would not have been possible or practical to inform everyone of what was intended". They are especially perturbed to hear of studies where participant observers conduct intentionally covert research (i.e. keep their research secret from other participants). Studies such as Mars and Nicod's (1984) covert work about waiters in hotels have become somewhat notorious with university ethics committees. However, it is worth pointing out that there are many 'shades of grey' between complete secrecy and fully informed consent. For example, clinical trials utilizing control groups and placebos require some limits of information provided in advance and the right to withdraw from a study cannot be exercised after publication of the results. The British Sociological Association (2002) statement on ethical practice asserts that:

> "*As far as possible* participation in sociological research should be based on the freely given informed consent of those studied. This implies a responsibility on the sociologist to explain in appropriate detail, and in terms meaningful to participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking and financing it, why it is being undertaken, and how it is to be disseminated and used" [emphasis added].

Key ideas here are "as far as possible" recognizing that the practicalities and nature of the research may impact on this (e.g. observing in a public place where it is not possible to inform and receive consent in advance – see O'Connell Davidson, 2008) and "appropriate detail" that suggests that full and detailed disclosure may be a problem (e.g. using research or discipline specific jargon to introduce a project may well confuse rather than enlighten a prospective participant. In addition to this, the actual meaning of covert research is of some significance; research that is covert is "disguised or concealed" (Collins English Dictionary, 1993) may be very different to fieldwork that is not *intentionally* disguised or concealed from everybody, but is simply not explicitly explained to everyone present – as in the case where key participants (employees and regular customers) are informed but occasional customers are not necessarily told about the research, but with no intention to deceive anyone. Similarly, Pierce's (1995) covert approach to her fieldwork, discussed earlier, could be seen as blurred somewhat as she did not keep the subject of her research secret, but did not disclose the full nature of her fieldwork strategy. Such cases will inevitably present researchers with personal and professional ethical dilemmas, a challenge made increasingly difficult by ever more demanding ethical oversight by university managers; gaining approval for research involving any sort of deception or lack of openness with study participants and subjects requires researchers to present ever more convincing arguments for their research. However, it would be very unfortunate if researchers were discouraged from conducting this sort of research because of managerial concerns and worries, as it is certainly personally rewarding and provides great opportunities for valuable contributions in many areas of business and management research. As such, it is probably best for aspiring participant observers to seek opportunities for overt fieldwork whenever possible, certainly when starting out on a research career as graduate students.

ANALYSING THE DATA AND DISSEMINATING PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION RESEARCH

This section cannot realistically – and does not seek – to provide a how-to-do-it guide for the analysis of participant observation data. This is partly because the subject of data analysis is not straightforward, especially as the number of traditions and techniques of data analysis make it unreasonable to select one particular approach as suitable for all studies. I have been particularly influenced by Spradley's (1970; 1980) guides to data analysis following a structured process of data analysis. However, one of the challenges facing novice participant observers in business and management research is a relative lack of discussion of data analysis and interpretation within this field (Sandiford and Seymour, 2007). As suggested earlier, this seems to be partly because of a focus on journals with particularly demanding word limits that often seem to ignore the need for qualitative research in general to deliver the word-rich messages of this sort of investigation. As editors and reviewers are often and understandably focused on ensuring their journals provide their readers with cutting edge theoretical and empirical contributions to knowledge, it is understandable that detailed and user-friendly accounts of qualitative data analysis techniques are relatively rare in the business and management literature. For example, the highly rated *Human Relations* (nd) journal specifies in its guide for submissions that "[a]uthors should ensure that their methods section is not too long, avoiding overly long explanations of why particular norms and standards have been chosen". Similarly, many student textbooks on research methods follow the trend of trying to include as many methodologies and techniques as possible given the wide and varied research traditions within business and management. However, despite this, there is a rich tradition of methodological writing in the anthropological and sociological literature that is accessible to business and management researchers, with a number of helpful texts focusing on qualitative data analysis in general (e.g. Miles and Huberman, 1994) and participant observation in particular (e.g. Spradley, 1980). The main limitation of this literature from a business and management perspective, is that can focus more on broader community based participant observation, commonly with ethnographic emphasis, and there is often less attention given to organizationally based research, although organizational ethnographies are relatively easy to find in the empirical literature.

Another challenge for the prospective participant observer, as hinted earlier, is the relative interchangeability of ethnography and participant observation in the wider literature; it is not always clear whether discussion of participant observation data analysis is based on ethnographic methodological assumptions and ideology. However, this can perhaps be overemphasized. After all, ethnographers probably have more experience of dealing with participant observation data collection and analysis than most other researchers and they have much to offer the novice fieldworker whatever her/his academic discipline. In his book *Participant Observation*, Spradley (1980, p. 33) constantly refers to "ethnographic data" synonymously with participant observation data. He asserts that data analysis "cannot wait until you have collected a large amount of data. In ethnographic inquiry, analysis is a process of question discovery", rather than simply answering pre-designed questions. Here, he clearly delimits his discussion to ethnography. However, it is hard to imagine any participant observation that this point does not apply to; it seems almost inevitable that any researcher actively engaged in this sort of fieldwork could ignore phenomena that would suggest alternative directions of investigation – simply keeping to an original research question would seem particularly foolish if the data are opening up an apparently more appropriate line of inquiry. Thus, the ethnographic ideal of concurrent or interactive data collection and analysis (Sandiford and Seymour, 2007, p. 727) seems equally to relate to any form of participant observation.

This also fits with Spradley's (1980) increasingly focused approach to fieldwork that requires an ongoing approach to data analysis rather than seeing analysis as a discrete stage and activity in the research process. This ideal seems particularly clear in ongoing participant observation, although it can apply to other sorts of research, especially involving more qualitative methods. In line with Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995) discussion of developing and emerging research questions during the fieldwork, Spradley (1980, p. 34) sees fieldwork as taking three phases: (1) *Descriptive observations*, which continue throughout the project, providing broad, relatively unfocused observations of the field and helps identify phenomena requiring (2) more *focused observations*. In turn, this increasing focus gradually enables the fieldworker to seek increasingly (3) *selective observations* whereby close attention is given to particular behaviors, routines, rituals etc that have been identified as central to answering the research questions. However, despite such increasing focus, he does point out that these three stages are not mutually exclusive (i.e. descriptive observations do continue concurrently with focused and selective observations while focused observations continue with selective observations).

From a personal perspective, given the need to maximize the message(s) possible within journal word limits, it may be appropriate to focus on particular methodological issues/challenges faced in a study rather than trying to give a full account of the whole methodological story. For example, Sandiford and Seymour's (2013) methodological account is necessarily concise, giving an overview of the approach with supporting references; notably, the data analysis approach is briefly introduced, referring readers to a key methodological source that provides more depth. In this particular study the focus was on participant observation as a public house employee; the paper explored employees' attitudes towards and consumption of alcohol in and around their workplace. Because of this, a key methodological issue was the fieldworker's own position in relation to alcohol during the data collection, so this was explored in rather more depth than other challenges faced during the study as shown in the following excerpt.

> Observing and participating in a number of the after-work drinking sessions helped to better understand the behaviours and interactions of colleagues, although it was often more difficult to separate observer and participant roles when drinking with colleagues after work. An example of this sort of participant research was presented by Gough and Edwards (1998) who analysed audio-recorded dialogue during a drinking session in which Edwards took part. As in the current study, they did consider whether the fieldworker should have more of an observer role, "abstaining from alcohol with a view to taking field notes as the session progressed" but decided against this as it would seem "artificial and unrealistic" (1998, p. 413). This does present ethnographers with a further challenge: participation calls for shared consumption (of drink) while observation is likely to be impaired with intoxication. As much as anything, the reflective nature of the field notes helps an ethnographer keep in touch with the researcher self/role in reminding him/her of the research purpose as participation develops over time
>
> (Sandiford and Seymour, 2013, p. 126).

This also highlights the importance of openness and reflexivity when reporting observational studies; it is crucial to discuss the nature, type, level and implications of the participation if readers are to be able to evaluate the quality of reported research. This excerpt raises at least one potential distraction for the fieldworker (alcohol consumption during data collection) – *should I join in and risk losing observational acuity or should I stand back from the drinking and risk losing participatory inclusion as an outsider?* A similar issue was highlighted by Graham et al (1980), albeit from a different perspective. Their study of "Skid Row" bars was based on observation of patrons' behavior, with observers taking an unobtrusive approach, with pairs of observers engaging in minimal participation (though they did purchase a drink and act as customers). Despite this they found themselves to be conspicuous through their behavior – when they "lingered over a single drink for 2 or 21/2 hr" (Graham, 1980, p. 280) and appearance – ethnicity, social class, clothing etc. This draws attention to another possible paradox, with an unobtrusive strategy, whether as complete observer (Gold, 1958) or engaging in passive participation (Spradley, 1980) actually seeming to draw more attention to the fieldworker because their behavior is likely to be seen as incongruous to the other participants. In the final excerpt below I reflect on the pilot study of my first public house research.

> Although the research conducted in this project was not covert, and he [I] was open with all the staff about his activities, there was little evidence of the fieldworker being seen as an outsider intruding in their workplace, which was encouraging. Most of the staff, however, did express an interest in the project and were enthusiastic about taking part in the study, sharing and discussing relevant experiences. It is not easy to demonstrate that trust was developed, however there was a variety of evidence to suggest that a sound level of rapport existed between fieldworker and most of the other study participants. This took two forms, work-based and leisure based. There were few examples of tension in the workplace during the pilot study beyond what appeared to be everyday issues of working in public houses, and the fieldworker regularly engaged in out-of-work-hours socialising with a number of his colleagues.
>
> Although there is no guarantee that participants in the study did not act differently than they would normally for the benefit of the researcher, working and, in some cases, living together would make it rather difficult to maintain such behaviour indefinitely. At work the researcher was involved in joking, arguments, moaning about customers, management or colleagues, feuding and other aspects of pub life in the same way as any other colleague in the unit. None of the other service workers had been working there for long, and few were local, so there was no question of the fieldworker being excluded as an outsider ... field-diary excerpts relate to relationships with employees at work and leisure. For example, the following was written about a late night encounter after closing:
>
> "After the customers left, [I] sat down with James [manager] and Kevin [part time barman] for a beer – the subject of relationships among staff came up. Kevin talked about a couple who used to have big public arguments, James said it is 'unethical' to argue in public, and went on to condemn as 'unprofessional' to publicly yell at a member of staff - he 'always' takes them aside (off stage) for that."
>
> The sort of encounter reported above could be seen as simply a friendly conversation, although as Spradley (1979, p. 58) pointed out "skilled ethnographers often gather most of their data through participant observation and many casual, friendly conversations while introducing a few ethnographic questions". Thus the opportunity to talk to colleagues over drinks after work was important in both developing rapport and gathering data.
>
> (Sandiford, 2004, p. 127-128)

CONCLUSION

The world of research often seems filled with paradoxes, contradictions, philosophical and ethical dilemmas within contextual complexity and ambiguity. It could perhaps be argued that it is somewhat paradoxical to see participant observation as rather *less* subjective (at an individual level) than non-participant forms of observation. For example, the participant can possibly avoid the limitations of perceptual error and/or projection by consulting with other participants when interpreting observed phenomena. This is not to say that such consultation/cooperation would necessarily be *objective* in itself, rather that, if seeking to find social/cultural sense in phenomena, it would normally be preferable to draw from insider's socio-cultural knowledge rather than distorting this with the outsider's (observer's) socio-cultural knowledge; thus, the reported knowledge would be more *inter*-subjective in nature, based on some level of shared knowledge and experience.

Participant observation presents the researcher with many challenges, not least of which is managing multiple roles within the field. Given that one of these roles is to be the research ‘instrument’ itself, it is important to recognize that personal biases cannot always be cast off, which is one of the justifications for taking a reflexive approach to data collection, analysis and research dissemination. There is no single right or wrong mix of, or approach to, such roles. Rather, fieldworkers are advised to reflect on their roles as they develop and change over time through a reflexive approach to note keeping and data analysis.

Carrying out participant observation may seem daunting to investigators beginning a research career, but the experience of engaging with fieldwork provides a unique, exciting and rewarding opportunity to engage with research problems and interact with the research context and other participants first hand and in real time. This chapter cannot hope to do more than briefly introduce this research approach from a largely personal perspective. In doing this, it does perhaps highlight some particular advantages of participant observation for researchers in organizations while also drawing attention to some of the issues and challenges facing fieldworkers observing as participants There are inevitably various other aspects of participant observation that have either been glossed over or not discussed at all here. For example, issues cover a wide variety of topics including, but certainly not limited to, the practice of online fieldwork (e.g. Kulavuz-Onal & Vásquez 2013; Garcia et al, 2009) where researchers participate in and observe web-based activities of various types, personal danger and risk when conducting fieldwork (e.g. Palmer and Thompson, 2010), the often linked challenges of insider research and possible data contamination by fieldworkers (Mercer, 2007) and the practicality and ethics of using recording devices in the field (e.g. Speer and Hutchby, 2003).

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