

# Observations and Reflections of a Perpetual Fieldworker

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## Background

Although ethnographic fieldwork does not usually call for the generation and testing of hypotheses, it does require both theoretical and empirical knowledge.

- To go into the field devoid of any preconceived ideas of what one may be looking for is neither warranted nor realistic.
  - Sociological concepts, ideas, and information are activated both by the observational data and by the sociological reasoning in which one is trained.
  - A deep internalization of sociological thinking is required to do the running analysis and interpretation of continuously inflowing data.
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## Skills

A set of trained skills are also required.

- Foremost is skill in observation and interviewing, remembering and recording.
  - High pattern recognition.
  - The capacity to use one's self as an instrument and to recognize the connection between "self" and "other."
  - The ability not only to listen to what is said, but also to "hear" what is said and meant.
  - Attunement to the language of gesture and silence as well as to verbal language.
  - Faithful writing of field notes.
  - The interpersonal skill to manage, understand, and constantly analyze the socially complex and emotionally evocative role of participant observer.
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## Data Properties

An ethnographic research project is a highly specific case study made up of numerous smaller case studies and of the detailed qualitative materials from which they evolve.

- The micro data are enlarged by macro sociological concepts and by their bearing on larger issues.
- The data are also intrinsically comparative and intercultural in outlook.

- The data consist of first-hand knowledge of groups, communities, and subcultures that enhance the capacity to see both the differences that exist between them and what they have in common that link them socially and culturally.
  - Field notes are historical records of high veracity and value.
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## **Role of Observer**

The role of the participant observer distinguishes it from other forms of social and cultural inquiry.

- It is a reflexive role that can and should be continually observed and analyzed by the investigator.
- It entails a continuous balancing of involvement and detachment.
- It is a role that involves an ongoing attempt to develop relationships with the subjects of the research
- The observer must continually examine her/himself and relationships to those being studied, to avoid becoming too positively identified with certain individuals and groups and/or developing too little rapport, or negative rapport with others.
- When the participant observer recognizes her positive or negative overinvolvement, she must record it in her notes, analyze it, and work to rectify it.
- All of this is difficult especially when the researcher's own social values and moral convictions are being challenged by what she observes and experiences.
  1. It may be necessary to temporarily withdraw from the field to regain a more composed, equilibrated perspective.
  2. Managing this is rendered more difficult when there is a desire to intervene, remedy, or rectify situations encountered in the field.
  3. Social scientists are less likely to be prepared for the ways in which they themselves may be altered by their field experiences and relationships than they are for the "observer effect" they are likely to have on the persons and groups with whom they interact in the course of their research.
- The role of the field researcher, in common with all social roles, is not self-determined.
  1. It is shaped by the persons in the field with whom she interacts.
  2. It calls for a continuing attempt to understand the attitudes, values, beliefs, unbeliefs, and behavior of those studied
  3. It requires the dynamic balancing of active, empathetic participation, and the ability to "stand back," self-awareness and self-restraint
  4. It may be accompanied by a high level of stress that can lead to "burnout."

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**Participation**

The chief mode of participation is talking with people individually and in groups, which can take several forms.

- The most “natural” is being present and listening when people are conversing with one another and recording as close to verbatim as possible the sociological crux of the exchanges.
- Being an interested listener may provide opportunities to ask specific questions about the discussion without unduly disrupting or influencing it.
- Being a participant observer provides opportunities to make arrangements for more formal probing at a later date, with the advantage that the rapport the field worker has established and the intimate knowledge of the group that she has acquired may lead to relevant data being brought to the investigator without her asking for it.
- Discerning what not to ask, and when not to question, are crucial. Under certain circumstances, overt probing by the researcher may alienate those being observed.

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**Informants  
and  
Respondents**

The role of informants is indispensable.

- As distinguished from respondents, informants are people with whom the researcher develops an especially close relationship in the field, who become the participant observer’s observing participants, advisors and counselors, and sometimes more than friends.
  - An ethnographer must find ways to observe, participate in, and come to understand the social world she is studying from the vantage points of as many persons who belong to it as possible.
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