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SOME COSTS AND PITFALLS IN FIELD RESEARCH

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Field research is not for the soft-hearted, the self-conscious, or the person who requires a great deal of structure. Some of the hesitations that many social scientists feel about venturing into the field are discussed. These include the difficulty in remaining anonymous, a reluctance to pry, fear of observing illicit behavior, lack of patience, and personal danger and discomfort.

My experience is that it is not the lack of control or reliability that discourages most social scientists from undertaking field research, but rather it is more personal considerations connected with intrusions of privacy, erratic scheduling, and an unwillingness to adapt to fluid and changing circumstances. These are the subtle but important aspects of field research which are rarely mentioned in the literature. I have yet to see a good description of just how boring it really is to sit in the same place and do nothing but watch other people. Rather quickly

one comes to dread the Nth visit to the hospital ward or school yard. From this standpoint, participant observation, where the investigator interacts with his subjects, is probably less boring than systematic observation where he remains apart and is frequently anonymous. The field worker must be able to adapt one's research methods to pre-stances and an almost constant barrage of difficult and ambiguous ethical challenges. Few social scientists will deny the value of studying behavior as it occurs under natural conditions, yet when it comes down to doing it, there

is a great deal of hesitation and uneasiness. Based on my own experiences in such diverse places as parks, airports, bars, hospitals, and schools (Sommer 1969), as well as the accounts of other field workers, I would like to discuss some of the sources of this concern.

Anonymity. One way to follow the naturalist's credo to observe nature with a minimum of disturbance is to remain as unobtrusive as possible. In theory this is feasible in a public place such as a park or cafeteria where there is frequent turnover of individuals and no one knows everybody present. In practice, there are severe limitations to the sort of person who can fit into a particular setting. A white social scientist cannot be anonymous in a ghetto, an attractive woman will have difficulty remaining anonymous in most public places, and observers who are especially tall or short, or have beards and other distinctive physical attributes would probably become figural. Liebow (1966), who spent a year with a group of street corner men in a black district of Washington, D.C., realized in the end that he would always be an outsider:

This brute fact of color, as they understood it in mine, irrevocably and absolutely stood it in their experience and as I understood it in their experience and as I understood it in their experience. . . . I used to play with the idea that maybe I wasn't as much of an outsider as I thought. Other events, and later readings of the field materials, have disabused me of this particular touch of vanity.

In laboratory research the assumption is often made that the physical appearance of the experimenter and his laboratory assistants are matters of little consequence. Whether this assumption is valid is an interesting question, but no one assumes it in the field. A young sociologist who gets his first introduction to field work in a setting in which

he does not fit will probably become discouraged early.

Another approach is for the observer to identify himself openly, but give sufficient time and opportunity for his subjects to become accustomed to his presence. Perhaps the best known adherents of this approach are Barker and his associates (1957) in Kansas, where the Midwest Field Station is located. Everyone in town knows about the field station, and the local children are accustomed to being followed by college students. More typical is the approach of Suttles (1968), who spent several years in a Chicago slum, Whyte (1943), who associated with a street gang in New Haven, or Roth (1963) in a tuberculosis hospital, all of whom identified themselves to local people as social scientists undertaking research.

Prying and spying. There are many taboos in this society against watching other people too closely. The young child is admonished not to stare; eye contact is often a sign of challenge or an invitation to a liaison (Cavan, 1966; Goffman, 1963). While a laboratory researcher must overcome his feelings about manipulating or deceiving other people, the survey researcher his inhibitions about prying into other people's personal affairs, the field worker must deal with his personal reluctance against spying. Most field workers have initially experienced acute self-consciousness about recording behavior in public situations. It seems clear that most laboratory subjects are prepared to be observed and manipulated. On the other hand, people in a public park or hospital waiting room do not expect to be observed. Hidden cameras can lessen the investigator's self-consciousness but hardly allay his guilt about observing people without their knowledge.

Observing illicit behavior. As he becomes accepted by the local people, the field worker begins to see backstage behaviors which are typically shielded from public view. The sheer length of time spent in a setting makes it impossible for the locals to conceal things from him. They have the option of trying to remove him from the setting physically, waiting until he is not around, or bringing him into their confidence. The successful field worker generally fits the third category. The unsuccessful one is criticized for interfering with routine and is removed, or is made so uncomfortable by the antipathy of the local people, that he packs his bag and departs. No matter how hard he tries to avoid it, the social scientist undertaking field work among college students will see some smoking dope, drinking beer under legal age, cheating on examinations, or otherwise engaging in socially disapproved behaviors. In a mental hospital, he will find patients lost in bureaucratic confusion, sitting on the ward without benefit of therapy, and attendants who seem disinterested in patient welfare. In a more prosaic setting such as a restaurant, he will see the unsanitary handling of foods, the reuse of leftovers, and the serving of spoiled foods. I will not belabor this point any further. It is inevitable that a backstage observer will see things that the audience is not supposed to see. On the one hand he feels some obligation to the people he observes not to be an informer, yet he has a larger professional responsibility when he sees mental patients brutally treated or food handled in an unsanitary manner. As soon as he interferes with the situation, he violates the cardinal rule of the naturalist. The customary solution is for him to (a) pretend not to see certain things, (b)

see them but not report them, or (c) to report them after the study is done without naming the principals. Nothing in graduate school training is very helpful in deciding which course of action to take.

Patience. In most interviewing, a warm-up period of 30 minutes could be considered unnecessarily long. There is nothing to parallel the several years it may take Hooker (1961) to gain the confidence of a member of the homosexual community in Los Angeles. It is not uncommon for zoologists to stake out an area and spend weeks in fruitless waiting in a stuffy and insect-ridden blind. The field worker needs the patience to endure long intervals when nothing relevant to his interests is happening. He uses these lacunae to place the relevant behaviors in perspective. Not only can he say how the behavior appears in nature, he also has an idea of the frequency and location of its occurrence. The price he pays is measured in weeks and months of rapport building and fruitless observation. Many social scientists lack the patience to endure the waiting required in the field.

Unforeseen circumstances. A field worker must be prepared to seize upon unusual occurrences, to capitalize upon serendipity, to convert surprises into natural experiments. The temporary absence of the group leader from the playground or a power failure in a housing project can reveal social relationships and channels of communication obscured under ordinary conditions. A field worker must not only be prepared for the inevitability of such emergencies (Murphy's law—if something can go wrong, it will), he must be prepared to use them in his research.

Self-calibration. On more than one occasion I have assigned a project to my students only to have conditions

change so drastically in the interim that the assignment became meaningless. There is no point in observing a park or playground in the rain, snow, or excessive wind. A field worker must be attuned to the rhythms and fluctuations of season and occasion. He must know something about his setting before he begins his systematic observations. There is no guarantee that categories and rating sheets can be carried over intact from one study to another. While his laboratory colleagues rely on standardized conditions to provide structure and repeatability, the field worker calibrates himself. Repeatability in the field means the ability to apply similar methods at another setting or time rather than recreating a previous reality. A good field worker must be both inner-directed in terms of self-discipline amidst changing conditions as well as directed outwards to the ingredients of a constantly shifting environment. He must have confidence that he knows himself as well as the situation he is studying.

Disillusionment. In the field it is difficult to maintain illusions about the nature of reality. Rather quickly one is exposed to the brutal way in which many social institutions operate—the bureaucratic impersonality of most schools and hospitals, the attitudes of police and public agencies toward homosexuals, the poor, and the young. Only occasionally does a laboratory investigator such as Asch (1956) or Milgram (1965) come up with findings that dispel our illusions about the way people behave, but a field researcher runs into these sorts of experiences daily. He is under severe internal pressure to become an advocate of the underdog and the mistreated. The experienced field worker must have a strong stomach and a tolerance for

human fallibility that is not usually needed in the laboratory.

Danger and discomfort. There are certain places where violence is a close neighbor. This would apply to research with drug users, observations in bars or on skid row, or association with street gangs. In this type of work, there is an obvious risk to the investigator's person and property. It is conceivable that the people who work on such sensitive topics; are attracted to them because of the adventure and the danger. On the other hand, in studying marijuana use it is exceedingly important to know how people respond in private homes as well as in the confines of the laboratory (Becker, 1963), and how homosexuals behave together as well as their responses to inkblots (Hooker, 1961). Securing people's permission has less meaning in the field than it does in the laboratory. There is a constant turnover of patrons in a bar and if one member of a street gang becomes angry at the observer and threatens him, it is not simply losing a single subject as would happen in a survey, it is the possibility of physical removal of the observer from the setting. In times of local controversy, there are likely to be refusals, insults, threats, and harrassment from special interest groups, and occasionally from city officials and the police. A good field worker must know when to back off and renew observations at a later date.

Potential legal problems. The field researcher is dealing with people who are not his clients, patients, students, or involved in any contractual relationship to him. They owe him nothing, not even the courtesy of opening their doors and listening to his introduction. There is also the likelihood of his being mistaken for a government agent or someone engaged in illicit activities.

To spend excessive time in a bar without engaging in the appropriate ceremonies is to invite everyone's suspicion. The same applies to an adult observing near a children's school or playground. It is true that the public has become more aware of the role of the social researcher and there are several popular novels such as *The Chapman Report* dealing with his activities, but this has encouraged bogus interviewers and salesmen masquerading as public opinion pollsters. The social researcher has no legal protection other than that extended to any citizen in his everyday business. Courts have not yet decided his records are as confidential as those of the physician or lawyer (Pomeroy, 1963). It is entirely conceivable that an anthropologist observing a street gang could be required to testify in court about the gang's activities.

In conclusion, I have tried to explain why field research is not for the soft-hearted, the self-conscious, or the person who needs a great deal of structure. Undoubtedly it selects its own practitioners. I have never seen a study comparing the life styles of laboratory and field workers, but I suspect there are significant differences. I do not believe that a creative researcher can be pointed toward the laboratory or field if his basic interests are in the other direction. On the other hand, it seems entirely reasonable to expose undergraduates and graduate students to both approaches to see which is closest to the student's interests. The obstacles described in this paper would give anyone pause before venturing out in the field, but they should not deter the motivated or adventurous. People do not choose to work in the field because of ignorance about sampling procedures, statistics, or experimental design.

They are out there primarily because they find it satisfying to study behavior in the settings in which it occurs and they believe that this sort of data is necessary in understanding and predicting human behavior.

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