The Active Participant-Observer: Applying Social Role Analysis to Participant Observation

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Participant observation approaches have been important components of ethnographic research. Generally, however, observation has been emphasized over participation. But there are many ethnographic contexts in which active participation by the ethnographer is advantageous, if not essential, to the collection of quality data. This article provides a framework for analyzing the potential benefits of an ethnographer participating in an active role in a given ethnographic setting. Using theories from organizational studies and the organization of work, a framework for determining the attributes relevant to a given active role for the collection of ethnographic data is presented. Three case studies are analyzed using such a framework. They include an ethnographic study of a fish camp in Alaska; a study of the red-light district in Washington, D.C.; and a study of Chinese and Taiwanese immigrant communities in Southern California.

Keywords: active participant observation; ethnography; social role analysis; data quality

Although termed the anthropological method by such practitioners as William Foote Whyte (1984), ethnography has become a widely accepted method of research across the whole of the social sciences. Traditionally, the demands of ethnography dictated a long-term commitment to a village, community, or cultural group, often non-Western, so that informant rapport could be established, the language learned, cyclical environmental and economic influences (e.g., seasonality) understood, and systematic observations made. In these studies, the ethnographer generally used the method of partic-

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ipant observation, with an emphasis more on observation because ethnic and cultural differences would allow the ethnographer to maintain only an amateur standing in the culture at best. However, anthropologists and sociologists, as well as other social scientists (e.g., education researchers), are more often than not now studying contemporary social groups, cultures, or subcultures (e.g., immigrant groups) in a wide range of settings (e.g., work, urban, suburban, etc.) or are, more frequently, “studying one’s own culture” (Srivastava 2004). With these trends comes lessened racial, linguistic, and cultural distance between the ethnographer and the people he or she studies, and, as a result, we find a mixed bag of both positive and negative methodological consequences (Jones 1970).

This article examines problems facing ethnographers studying contemporary work and other ethnographic settings. We start with a look at ethnography and participant observation, particularly with regard to active participation. This is followed by the development of a framework for understanding the characteristics of active participant observation roles, based on context-specific formal social roles, relevant for the collection of quality ethnographic data. Three case studies provide examples of the application of the social role analytical framework to active participation including a study of a fish camp in Alaska; a study of the red-light district in Washington, D.C.; and a study of Chinese immigrants in Southern California. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the importance of having an a priori understanding of potential active ethnographer roles in a field setting.

ETHNOGRAPHER AS STRANGER

Ethnography has never been an easy task, irrespective of the fieldwork context. For many, the fieldwork process is an anxiety-provoking endeavor involving feelings of self-doubt, fear, and often helplessness. To make problems worse, the uninitiated and, in particular, nonsocial scientists often have difficulty understanding exactly what ethnography is (Agar 1980). Moreover, the sometimes cosmic, almost religious descriptions of what exactly an ethnographer does in the field adds to the confusion. As D’Andrade (1976: 179–80) stated,

At present, the most frequently used (and perhaps most effective) technique for the study of cultural belief systems, is for the individual ethnographer to immerse himself in the culture as deeply as possible, and by some series of private, unstated, and sometimes unconscious operations, to integrate large amounts of information into an organized and coherent set of propositions.
From the above description of the ethnographic process, it is not surprising that fieldwork is an anxiety-provoking enterprise and that the uninitiated are often skeptical or confused. But as most practitioners know, ethnography is actually a grab bag of structured, semistructured, and unstructured methods, both qualitative and quantitative, employed to understand bits and pieces of any social or cultural system (Johnson 1990). Admittedly, however, it is probably true that ethnography always has, still does, and always will be enveloped in an aura of mystique to both practitioners and non-practitioners alike.

One of the major factors contributing to the difficulties facing an ethnographer in the field is his or her status as a stranger or outsider to the social system under study (Agar 1980). Access to information can be severely limited because of this outsider’s status, and the success or failure of a project may hinge on the ethnographer’s ability to deemphasize such a status. Other factors contributing to problems facing the fieldworker in a particular setting include residence patterns (e.g., nomadic, transhumant), production constraints (e.g., farming, fishing, degrees of competition, assembly-line work), environment (e.g., island, jungle, urban ghetto), geographical isolation, regional conflicts, language, degrees of social stratification, degrees of social homogeneity, government influences (e.g., government policy toward peasants or cultural groups), need to establish working relations with tribes or ethnic groups, intellectual property rights, and the cultural groups’ experience with previous scrutiny (e.g., Who was there before you, and what kind of impression did they leave?).

Ethnographic research in both sociology and anthropology has historically been dominated by participant-observer approaches (Whyte 1984). The major variance in the use of this method has been the emphasis on either the participation side or the observer side of the concept. Some prefer to think of participant observation as a means for the observer to immerse himself or herself in the daily lives of the people under study without actual participation, thus avoiding the problems associated with being a “reflective person” (i.e., worrying about career, status, friendship, past, future, etc.). Some emphasize keeping a distance between the researcher and those being studied as critical to the success of the enterprise (Salisbury 1976). Nelson (1969), on the other hand, believed strongly in “full” participation, as opposed to what he calls “passive” participation, of the ethnographer in the field setting. By doing so, he believes the activities participated in can be more easily internalized and thus more easily documented.

Nelson (1969), in discussing one of the advantages to full participation, makes a point that is particularly relevant to the issue addressed here. He emphasizes the importance of establishing a normal role in a society, espe-
cially engaging in physical work, to lessen conspicuousness and aid in establishing rapport. Any means for lessening conspicuousness, increasing rapport, or establishing oneself in a normal role in the social system can be helpful in eliminating the stigma associated with an outsider’s status. With respect to physical work, at least in many contexts, the members of a work community are particularly sensitive to work and its related imagery. Therefore, often people involved in the study of work-oriented communities without a particular work status may be looked on with distrust or may not be understood. Minimizing ambiguities with respect to the social role of an ethnographer in some settings can aid in increasing informant trust and can decrease the reliance on stereotypes by members of the community. In other cases, it may be essential to the conduct of the research, as in Mark Fleischer’s (1989) ethnography of a maximum-security prison, where access was allowed if and only if he went through actual training and served as a line corrections worker.

Thus, fieldwork often demands an ethnographer’s participation in a social role that is culturally definable. A good example of this is Van Maanen’s (1972, 1973) study of police in Union City (a pseudonym). His ability to ride in police cars and be privy to certain information dictated his participation in and completion of the police academy. He went through training and on graduation was presented with a Smith & Wesson 357 magnum, a firearm explicitly prohibited by departmental policy. However, such a gift reflected, in part, his acceptance by his fellow officers. Although Van Maanen made no effort to conceal his research intentions, his participation in the training process provided him a culturally understandable identity other than the unfamiliar role of ethnographer.

Further research objectives hinged on Van Maanen’s ability to maintain a role that allowed his informants to feel confident that in times of emergency, the “ethnographer” would be there to back them up, something expected of any rookie officer. Without such a relationship, the collection of data would have been much more difficult if not impossible. Van Maanen’s role as rookie far overshadowed his role as ethnographer, giving him access to data, information, and observations other researchers would have found difficult to achieve.

Compared to the other forms of participant observation, this example is much closer to Nelson’s (1969) idea of full or active participant observation. Admittedly, the ethnographer in this case will eventually move on with his or her life, lacking the problems associated with the “reflective person.” He or she is, however, for that brief moment in the field, more than just an observer. He or she is relied on to help if needed, and as a result, the role as ethnographer is overshadowed by their culturally recognized role as coworker, part-
ner, and so forth, a role that sets him or her apart from most ethnographers in other contexts.

The recognition of the varieties of fieldworker roles is by no means new, and much has been written on the breadth of possible roles, ranging from the full or complete participant to the full observer or onlooker (Gold 1958; Patton 1986). Adler and Adler (1987) provided a good discussion of the implications for researchers of various levels of social integration into the field setting. They make a distinction between peripheral membership roles, active membership roles, and complete membership roles. Each of these roles involves increasingly more participation in the ethnographic setting, ranging from almost pure observation, on one hand, to “going native,” on the other. Adler and Adler also make the point that the choice to play an active role is often an evolutionary process rather than an a priori choice, in that an ethnographer may move naturally from a peripheral role to a more active role in the course of the ethnographic process. However, they see this as the exception rather than the rule. We concentrate here on active participation as a conscious choice and provide a detailed framework for the purposeful selection of active organizationally or culturally defined roles.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND THE ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL ROLES

There are certain theoretical heuristics that an ethnographer can use in understanding the potential liabilities and benefits of choosing to actively participate in a culturally defined (or organizationally defined) social role. These heuristics are based on much of what we now know about work organization with respect to various factors in an organizational setting that influences the flow of information between groups of people and individuals, an individual’s power and autonomy, and degrees of social and spatial mobility. In choosing a social role, the potential ethnographer should be aware of how these factors will influence the kinds and diversity of data collection respective to each position. For example, if the study requires a detailed understanding of a specific part of an organization or subculture, consideration of the ethnographer’s active role need take into account only roles particularly important in maximizing the collection of relevant data for that specific focal group. A more general understanding of the field setting or organization as a whole, however, may require entrance into the social system through a distinctly different social role. The study’s context and focus will have a significant influence on social or active role selection. In addition, the requisite skills needed for any position will most definitely have a determining influ-
ence on the ethnographer’s choice. However, awareness of such roles and their properties can significantly enhance the chances for a successful ethnographic enterprise.

A variety of factors influence the character of a particular social position within any organized work group or any group or organization for that matter. This is true for Western, non-Western, traditional, and modern contexts. It is a fact that technological complexities produce variation with respect to the effects of technical relations on the nature and tenor of social relations. These can be understood a priori by understanding some of the socio-technical principles underlying social relations within any work, formal organizational, or cultural setting.

Within the course of work, for example, various factors have an influence on an individual’s role with regard to such things as status, power, and autonomy. Some of the more important factors include task diversity, technical interdependence, control over the work pace, technical demands, risk, danger, and uncertainty. High-status positions/roles can more often than not be characterized as having high levels of skill, less repetition, and minimal amounts of machine pacing with a work environment involving a high degree of integration and interdependence (Blauner 1964; Blau and Duncan 1967). Others, too, have noted the influence of these technical factors and of risk and danger in influencing a worker’s relative power and autonomy (Gouldner 1954; Kerr and Siegel 1954; Stinchcombe 1959; Udy 1959; Woodward 1965; Perrow 1967; Thompson 1967; Norr and Norr 1974, 1977; Crozier 1978).

Uncertainty may often play an important role in influencing an individual’s relative power and autonomy and the degree to which he or she is free to move among social groups. Crozier (1978), for example, found that a maintenance worker’s position in a French factory, a relatively powerful position, was surrounded by a high degree of uncertainty with respect to where the maintenance person would be at any one point in time (temporal and spatial uncertainty). This uncertainty and the fact that he or she was responsible for fixing breakdowns on the assembly line (i.e., need for skills)—breakdowns that were often the responsibility of the assembly-line worker themselves (i.e., dependence)—leads to a situation in which locational uncertainty and the need for skill significantly influence a person’s power, autonomy, and access to different segments of the study community.

These factors have a definite impact on the kinds and diversity of information an active ethnographer can collect in this factory context. For example, an ethnographer in the active role as assembly-line worker, because of locational certainty, limited control over the work pace, limited task diversity, and limited technical demands, would have limited power and auton-
omy and a relatively low degree of social access (i.e., limited access to other
groups in the factory). A comparison of the two positions above (i.e., mainte-
nance vs. assembly line) yields a potential situation in which the types and
variety of information and data that can be collected by a researcher in each
of the active roles stand in stark contrast. The maintenance worker has a clear
advantage in terms of mobility and access to a wider range of actors in the
work setting and possesses relatively more power. Thus, proper selection of
an active role for the ethnographer can greatly influence on the potential
reliability and diversity of data collected.

In a methodological piece such as this, we find it extremely important to
provide a sufficient number of examples to help in evaluating the usefulness
and applicability of the approach advocated. Thus, we present three case
studies in which each of the authors actively participated in one or more iden-
tifiable social roles within the ethnographic setting. The first example
involves the ethnographer’s full participation in an isolated commercial fish
camp in Alaska. The description of the study and the methodological analysis
that follows are presented to illustrate the usefulness of active participant
observation. But, as we shall see, the choice of this method and the choice of
where to actively participate in the social system are highly contingent on the
fieldwork context, as illustrated by the two remaining case studies.

We retrospectively analyze potential active roles in these three ethno-
graphic settings in terms of the various factors regarding theories of the orga-
nization of work discussed above. A wide variety of theoretical frameworks
can be used to judge the qualities of active roles with respect to the objectives
of a given study. The criteria we use in our analysis is by no means limited to
those presented here, and the creative imagination of the ethnographer can
incorporate other theoretically derived frameworks for the analysis of active
ethnographic roles. The primary objective of this article is to examine the
importance of an active participant observation approach and to suggest a
framework for a systematic understanding of the advantages and disadvan-
tages of an active formal role in a given ethnographic context. The following
role analyses involve examples of twelve criteria for comparing potential
active roles in an ethnographic setting. The criteria relate to factors facilitat-
ing or inhibiting the collection of quality ethnographic data. These include
the following.

Freedom of social movement: The extent to which an active role allows for the
movement among the various identifiable groups and subgroups found in the
ethnographic setting. Overidentification with a single group can often inhibit
access to a diverse set of informants.
Access to information: The variety of kinds of information available to a given active role.

Type of informant relations: The extent to which informants depend on the ethnographer’s active role in the course of their own activities.

Types of information: The types of information available and the amount of detail afforded ethnographers in an active role.

Need for specialized knowledge: The extent to which an active role requires specialized knowledge and skills (e.g., carpentry skills).

Neutral status ability: The tendency for an active role to more or less be identified as part of one or more given groups or subgroups. This is related to the freedom of social movement above.

Information reliability: The extent to which active roles ensure the reliability of information collected and afford reliability checks.

Reliance on key informants: The extent to which an ethnographer in a given role must depend on key informants for collecting data.

Entrance probability: The chances surrounding the entrance of any given ethnographer in a particular active role, assuming limited skill sets.

Accessibility to organizational sectors: This is similar to freedom of movement in that it concerns the ability of an active role to have access to various organizational levels and sectors, including such things as social class.

Power within the organizations/setting: The degree of power and autonomy associated with a given active role.

Basis of power: The particular characteristics of an active role that constitute the basis for such power.

Many of these criteria are interrelated. For example, access to information will generally correlate positively with types of information, and need for specialized knowledge will be positively associated with power within the organization or setting. In addition, these are just a sample of a whole range of possible theoretically informed criteria or factors that can be used to assess the features of an active role as it relates to the collection of ethnographic data. Depending on the objectives of a given study, these and possibly other criteria will be important in one way or another in ensuring the success of the ethnographic enterprise.

We are by no means the first to relate the quality and extent of data collection to ethnographic roles. Snow, Benford, and Anderson (1986) compared three types of ethnographer-derived roles that are more emergent and negotiated—controlled skeptic, overt activist, and buddy-researcher—to three different types of ethnographic data collection. A critical distinction needs to be made, however, between the framework advocated here and some of these of earlier studies. Our ethnographic context-specific formal role framework clearly falls under the guise of active participation discussed by Gold (1958), Emerson (2001), Patton (1986), and Adler and Adler (1987) and does not preclude the ethnographer-derived roles discussed by Snow, Benford, and Anderson (1986). Instead, such a framework provides the
means for understanding how a range of formal or culturally identifiable roles found in a system can be more or less useful within a more dynamic, active participant observation strategy.

EXAMPLE 1: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION IN AN ALASKAN FISH CAMP

The importance of these analytical criteria is readily illustrated in the study of commercial fishing groups or communities. In such ethnographic settings, the pursuit of a highly uncertain resource, the requisite mobility of a hunting activity, productive isolation, involvement in an environment alien to humans, high degrees of technical variation in the productive effort, emphasis on work, competition consequent to a common property resource, and increasing government intervention in the lives of fishers have often made fieldwork in such settings challenging. The difficulties with gaining entrance into a community or group and establishing trust with informants are exacerbated by these factors (Johnson 1990).

Of all contemporary West Coast fisheries, the short-time salmon fishery of Bristol Bay located in southwest Alaska is perhaps the most ecologically magnificent, financially rewarding, and socially exotic (Miller and Johnson 1981; Van Maanen, Miller, and Johnson 1982). Contributing to this annual drama are (1) a stark and remote setting in tundra Alaska, (2) the world’s largest runs of sockeye salmon, (3) a dramatic seasonal influx of commercial fishers and processors, and (4) a high degree of distrust between fishers and processors.

During 1979 and 1980, Johnson conducted a study of migratory commercial fishermen on the West Coast of the United States. As a part of this study, he spent two salmon seasons in Bristol Bay. The bay represented the most difficult part of the overall research since conversations with fishers on the West Coast relayed to him the isolation and character of the fishery. The shortness of the salmon season, the social isolation of fishers in the canneries, and the lack of decent, affordable shelter in the bay dictated actual participation in a cannery social system.

The following analysis is based on Johnson’s actual participation in four of the possible formal work roles found in a fish camp in Naknek, Alaska. During these two seasons, he worked as a boat carpenter, tenderworker, bookkeeper, and commercial crewmember. Each of the roles associated with these work positions afforded him the ability to make generalizations about all positions within the camp with respect to the types and quality of information an active ethnographer could be expected to collect.
The fish camp in which Johnson worked was housed in the remains of a once fully operational cannery. The general layout of the bunkhouses fostered the social isolation of the various ethnic groups of fishers, as well as with management and employees. This particular setting made interaction between groups of fishers difficult, and in most cases, members of a bunkhouse interacted little with fishers from other bunkhouses (Miller and Johnson 1981).

The first important methodological question that arises is, What social position in the camp maximizes chances for the active ethnographer to collect data on the entire social system found in the fish camp? Table 1 presents a review of the organizationally defined social positions in the fish camp and the theoretical criteria relevant to the collection of ethnographic data discussed above.

Using these criteria as a heuristic for making a choice for position selection will initially be influenced by both the need for specialized knowledge and the probability of entrance into the system through such a position. In general, one can say that those positions needing specialized knowledge will have a lower probability of entrance. In this case, Johnson had acquired boat-building skills during his undergraduate and early graduate years. These skills enabled him to enter the system as a carpenter, which is a highly respected position within the camp because of its need for skill and its control over resources and work pace. Many ethnographers, however, would not have such requisite skills. But a glance at Table 1 shows that the gofer position allows for freedom of social movement, informational diversity, a neutral status, a low reliance on key informants, access to all organizational sectors, and control over resources. Yet this position requires a limited amount of specialized knowledge and has a moderately high probability of entrance. A position such as this would enable an active ethnographer with limited commercial skills to enter the system. In addition, the bookkeeper position would also provide such a possibility.

The gofer is an example of a position that displays a high degree of locational uncertainty (Crozier 1978). This position dictated the movement from bunkhouse to bunkhouse without a specific schedule or pace. During this movement, the gofer would replace linen, soap, and a variety of other daily necessities. Control over these resources and the resulting familiarity with fishers provided much opportunity for interaction with most organizational sectors (primarily the various ethnic groups) in the camp. On the other hand, a position like the night watchman, although not requiring any specialized knowledge, is characterized by timed movement to reach watch stations.
TABLE 1
Characteristics of Possible Active Social Roles Relevant to Participant Observation within the Fish Camp

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Freedom of Social Movement</th>
<th>Access to Information</th>
<th>Type of Informant Relations</th>
<th>Need for Neutral Reliance</th>
<th>Neutral Status Ability</th>
<th>Information Reliability</th>
<th>Reliance on Key Informants</th>
<th>Entrance Probability</th>
<th>Access to Organization Sectors</th>
<th>Power within the Organization</th>
<th>Basis of Power</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boat captain</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Localized, detailed, and limited</td>
<td>Close, but limited</td>
<td>Detailed, limited to small group</td>
<td>Extremely high</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderately high</td>
<td>Skill and capital investment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crew</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Localized, detailed, and limited</td>
<td>Close, but limited</td>
<td>Somewhat detailed, limited to small group</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderately low</td>
<td>Skill and hard work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>Dependent</td>
<td>Fishermen and management</td>
<td>Moderately high</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderately high</td>
<td>Skill, technical know-how, and control of resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head port engineer</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>Highly dependent</td>
<td>Fishermen and management</td>
<td>Extremely high</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderately high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cook</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Fishermen and management</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderately high</td>
<td>Skill and control over resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office manager</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Localized, detailed, and limited</td>
<td>Dependent</td>
<td>Fishermen and management</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Skill, technical know-how, and control of resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head carpenter</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>Highly dependent</td>
<td>Fishermen and management</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Skill, technical know-how, and control of resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Beach gang&quot;</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>Moderately dependent</td>
<td>Fishermen and management</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Ability to perform favors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Localized, detailed, and limited</td>
<td>Highly dependent</td>
<td>Fishermen and management</td>
<td>Extremely high</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low at some levels</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Very high Decision-making status</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Freedom of Social Movement</th>
<th>Access to Information</th>
<th>Type of Informant Relations</th>
<th>Types of Information</th>
<th>Need for Specialized Knowledge</th>
<th>Neutral Status Ability</th>
<th>Information Reliability</th>
<th>Reliance on Key Informants</th>
<th>Entrance Probability</th>
<th>Access to Organization Section</th>
<th>Power within the Organization</th>
<th>Basis of Power</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Port engineer</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>Dependent</td>
<td>Fishermen and management</td>
<td>Moderately high</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Skill, technical know-how, and control of resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Gofer&quot;</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>Moderately dependent</td>
<td>Fishermen and management</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderately high</td>
<td>Moderately high</td>
<td>Moderately high</td>
<td>Control of resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tender-worker</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Weak ties</td>
<td>Fishermen and limited</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderately high</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Night watchman</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>Limited dependency</td>
<td>Fishermen and management and some management</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderately high</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bookkeeper</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderately diverse</td>
<td>Moderately dependent</td>
<td>Fishermen and management</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate high</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Control of resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Less active&quot; ethnographer</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Difficult to establish</td>
<td>Superficial</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
by a particular time (i.e., temporal and spatial certainty). This and the lack of control over any resources have an influence on the position’s low status in the overall social organization of the camp. It should be noted, however, that each position had the advantage of the ability to maintain a neutral status because neither was identified with cannery management or commercial fishers (i.e., they were considered labor). This is particularly important given the almost perpetual strife existing between fishers and management.

The carpenter position afforded Johnson the best opportunities for data collection. This position involved a dependency relationship with fishers, allowed for neutrality, and helped foster trust between him and all members of the camp. Although people in the fish camp knew Johnson was doing a study, his role as ethnographer was dramatically overshadowed by his role as carpenter. The others thought it a bit odd at times when he would ask them to perform some cognitive tasks (e.g., pile sorts), but they would always comply and often with much interest.

We have presented this brief analysis of possible roles an active ethnographer could use in a well-bounded organizational setting to help potential participant observation researchers be aware of features that could potentially influence interaction among members of a social system. The collection of quality ethnographic data was significantly facilitated by Johnson’s full participation in his active formal role as boat carpenter. Many ethnographers will find themselves in such a situation, particularly in a work or organizational context, and could use a framework such as Table 1 to help them choose a role that will maximize their chances of collecting good data.

The role of a “less active” ethnographer presented in Table 1 may be presented a little unfairly. However, Johnson had an experience that led to such caution. One afternoon during a “mug-up” (coffee break), two social science researchers came into the mess hall to interview some fishers. During the course of the interview, some fishers gave information that was somewhat untrue, and on one occasion, a fisher winked at Johnson as he was relaying a story to one of the interviewers. This incident made Johnson aware of how important his active participation was in establishing rapport with his informants, rapport that would have been much more difficult to establish with an outsider’s status, particularly in this geographically isolated, ethnically diverse, well-bounded work context.

We now turn to an example that is much less well defined organizationally but illustrates how this analytical framework can still be useful in assessing the characteristics of active roles within a more ambiguously bounded field setting.
EXAMPLE 2: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION
AND PORNOGRAPHY IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

During 1982, Weatherford (1986) conducted an ethnography of the red-light district of Washington, D.C. He gained entrance and access to this unique community of interest by taking a job as a night operator of a pornography store. In the rear of the store were sixteen “peep booths” that showed 2 minutes of pornographic film for 25 cents. Various magazines, books, and sexual paraphernalia were sold in the front of the store. The mixed environment of a public front space with a very private rear space made the shop a primary site for both legal and illegal activities. These included prostitution, use and sale of drugs, homosexual pickups, gambling, masturbation, and the fencing of stolen goods.

Being in the midst of all this, the store operator had to give at least tacit approval for most of these interactions. By permitting some activities such as prostitution, however, he limited others such as gambling or fencing. Thus, the operator acted as a mediator among diverse groups wanting to use the space. At the same time, the operator was caught between the conflicting demands of keeping the illegal activities low enough to keep the police away yet encouraging enough activity to keep the store owner’s revenues high.

During the time of research, which was entirely covert, Weatherford had the opportunity to observe diverse other researchers (data collectors) at work. These included journalists, police investigators, surveyors, commercial researchers, and academic researchers. Except in the case of some police investigations, all of these people were operating openly with various approaches. One social science researcher, for example, arranged numerous interviews with prostitutes. These were conducted in a hamburger restaurant in full view of the community and were always about child sexual abuse. The community, whether rightly or wrongly, assumed that sexual abuse was his subject of interest. Consequently, anyone with such a story could be recruited by any one of his former interviewees. Women without personal experience with sexual abuse helped one another invent such stories, or, more often, they borrowed a story from someone they had known. This was done not so much to deceive as to “give the customer what he wants.” The $10 per interview paid by the researcher encouraged people to be particularly good at telling these stories to be invited back for a follow-up interview.

A second researcher spent several months exploring various aspects of the day and night life in the district. In his first weeks there, he was befriended by a young man called “Reds,” who introduced the researcher around. The researcher did not pay cash for interviews, but he bought a lot of meals and drinks, loaned Reds money, and generally made himself useful to a large
number of street people. The researcher tried to investigate many of the stories Reds told him. Several times, Weatherford, in his role as store operator, witnessed people lying to agree with what they assumed to be the story that Reds had related. It also became obvious to him that people refused to give information by claiming not to know anything about it at all, even when he knew they were not telling the truth. Weatherford also saw the community close itself off to the researcher when Reds spread the word that the man was trouble and anyone talking with him was making a big mistake. These allegations were interpreted as threats, and community members ignored the researcher until he and Reds settled their differences. The community, however, closed ranks again after Reds was arrested for drugs, and many people speculated that the researcher had just gotten rid of Reds for his own reasons.

Even Weatherford became involved in deceiving researchers in various ways. Usually, this was no more than withholding information and pleading ignorance when asked. At times, however, it included lying to a researcher to get him out of the store where he was inhibiting business. In almost all cases, he would have gained nothing from interactions with other researchers, and yet such interactions might have cost him in various ways.

Table 2 shows a similar analysis of roles for the Weatherford example. There are a variety of recognized roles that fall under the general category of customer. These could include, for example, those who use the peep booths, prostitutes, drug users, and so forth. In general, the access to and type of information would depend on customer identity and behavior. What is interesting about this example is the number of researcher roles that were observed and included in the analysis. It is clear that the active role of store operator has a number of advantages for the collection of reliable data. The store operator has a full range of mobility throughout the store and must manage the activities of a diverse set of on-scene participants. Furthermore, the store operator’s status would help facilitate social access and mobility within the greater red-light district community as a whole. Thus, the store operator has a reasonable degree of social and geographic mobility and controls a wide range of resources (e.g., access), resources that can be negotiated in one form or another into the collection of reliable information.

One point should be made in reference to this sex-oriented ethnographic context. The study of sex can be controversial in and of itself, independent of the manner in which it is studied. However, actually engaging in some formal way in the enterprise, covertly or otherwise, has important ethical and personal safety implications. Wendy Chapkis (1997), for example, studied erotic labor by using in-depth interviews and actual participation as both a customer and a sex worker. What is important to note is that, in relation to the Weatherford study, the Chapkis study brings to the forefront the further need
### TABLE 2
Characteristics of Possible Social Roles Relevant to Research in a Red-Light District

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Freedom of Social Movement</th>
<th>Access to Information</th>
<th>Type of Informant Relations</th>
<th>Types of Information</th>
<th>Need for Specialized Knowledge</th>
<th>Neutral Status Ability</th>
<th>Information Reliability</th>
<th>Reliance on Key Informants</th>
<th>Entrance Probability</th>
<th>Accessibility to Organization/Setting Sectors</th>
<th>Power within the Organization/Setting</th>
<th>Basis of Power</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Store operator</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>Diverse and detailed</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Control of store activities/clean urine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Specialized</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporter</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Superficial</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Public exposure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police investigator</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Superficial</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Coercion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic &quot;survey&quot; researcher</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Superficial</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Favors, money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Less active&quot; ethnographer</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Superficial</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Favors, money</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to distinguish between the study approaches used by each. It might be more accurate to term Weatherford’s approach as *passive active participation* and Chapkis’s as *active active participation*, suggesting that even within an active participant observation framework, one can be more or less engaged given their formal role.

In the next section, we look at a case that illustrates the usefulness of this approach in an even more ambiguously bounded and spatially defined field setting. The challenge in this final example is to understand the range of active roles that can facilitate the collection of quality data in the urban sprawl that is Southern California.

**EXAMPLE 3: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND IMMIGRANTS FROM TAIWAN IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA**

In the third example, Christine Avenarius (2004) was interested in the ways in which Chinese and Taiwanese immigrants from Taiwan both create and manage personal networks in the vast space of dispersed settlements in Southern California, an area that also has global economic and cultural ties. Given this rather unique twentieth-century social and cultural milieu, it was intriguing to know how immigrants chose to use ethnicity in the course of constructing their personal networks. Avenarius had worked extensively in mainland China and was fluent in Mandarin.

The data for this study were collected using an ethnographic approach involving a variety of methods, including both quantitative and qualitative techniques (Miles and Huberman 1994). The design of the overall research process was mainly exploratory in nature, aiming to describe the social world of immigrants from Taiwan in the urban sprawl of Southern California. The initial stage of data collection, participant observation in the public spaces where Chinese and Taiwanese immigrants met, led to the development of questions for unstructured interviews with community leaders and the construction of semistructured interview questions with members of ethnic community organizations (Johnson and Weller 2002).

Actual fieldwork was conducted between April 1997 and April 1998. Prior to the start of data collection, Avenarius had spent the fall of 1996 at the University of California, Irvine (UCI), taking courses. During this period, she familiarized herself with the general geographic layout of South Orange County and its features. Because of the size of the urban area under study and the scarcity of centralized public gathering places of immigrants from Taiwan, in the first phase of fieldwork (April to early November 1997), she was occupied with participant observation, informal interviews, and unstructured
interviews. She spent the second phase of fieldwork, lasting until April 1998, conducting systematic interviews with selected informants primarily identified in the first phase, while continuing to be involved in participant observation.

Because Avenarius anticipated problems with the systematic selection of informants, she decided early on to focus mainly on immigrants who participated in at least one of the ethnic community organizations in the larger area or, in other words, did join others in public spaces. The goal was to compile a preliminary list of ethnic Chinese and Taiwanese organizations in South Orange County, to be able to contact all of them, and to pick a few members from each group as informants for semistructured interviews. Getting insights on the larger community involved informal talks with ethnic shop owners and shoppers in the two shopping areas in South Orange County with stores that catered specifically to Chinese and Taiwanese clients. To achieve these goals, she got a job as a part-time salesperson in a Chinese-owned and -operated optometry store in one of the ethnically oriented strip malls, working there from September to December 1997. Selling eyeglass frames and making appointments for patients gave her great familiarity with the linguistic patterns and behaviors of the ethnic population in and around Irvine. In addition, through the fall of 1997, Avenarius worked as a teaching assistant for an anthropology course at UCI, a university with a large Asian student population. Contact with students helped her in later attempts to find informants (e.g., the parents of students that fit a specific profile).

In the first phase of fieldwork, Avenarius obtained information about the area from interviews with Chinese and Taiwanese real estate agents, administrators at the school districts, board members of the Chinese schools in the area, doctors, bank employees, and religious leaders, specifically pastors of Chinese and Taiwanese Christian churches, as well as from clients at the optometry store. These were unstructured interviews with the purpose of eliciting information on the presence and dispersal of immigrants in South Orange County and their social involvement with members of their own group and those of other ethnic groups.

At the same time, Avenarius began to join ethnic community organizations to gain better access to build rapport with potential informants. She became a member of a local Chinese choir, a Chinese tap dance group, several ballroom dance classes, and several church and fellowship groups, as well as meetings of Yiguan Dao practitioners at their local temple. Participation was ongoing until she left the field in April 1998.

Weekends were usually booked with activities. In some instances, scheduling conflicts occurred, especially on Sunday mornings, when church services were held, the choir practiced, and the beginner’s lessons for ballroom
dancing were held. For a while, Avenarius attended meetings every other week and left earlier or came later. Some church meetings were scheduled on Sunday afternoons, and fellowship meetings usually took place in the early evenings. Meetings of the Yiguan Dao practitioners were held on Saturday nights. In addition, she visited meetings of the Chinese-American Chamber of Commerce, the Tzu-Chi Buddhist Charity Organization, and the board meetings of the South Coast Chinese Cultural Association.

As an active member participating in performances with the Chinese choir, the theater group of the choir, and the tap dance group, Avenarius was able to take part in other important immigrant activities such as alumni meetings (both in the San Gabriel Valley and Orange County), annual meetings of political associations, and charity events for local hospitals and retirement homes. These various active roles facilitated her access to a study community that was geographically and ethnically diffuse. Table 3 shows an analysis of the various active roles with respect to the criteria of interest. This example is quite different than the previous two examples in that the success of the study depended on Avenarius’s participation in more than one active role. A single active role would not have been adequate for achieving her study objectives, given the constraints of the suburban environment (e.g., urban sprawl). However, these various active roles became gateways to a whole range of other ethnic community groups and events greatly facilitating the second phase of the research.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although active participation has its benefits, there are a number of potential drawbacks. For example, leaving the field was difficult for Avenarius because she had become involved in several projects of the various community organizations. At several points in her study, she had self-doubts whether her approach to fieldwork had been ethically appropriate. In one such case, her immersion in the Yiguan Dao religious movement and her subsequent initiation caused many fellow group members to be concerned about her future well-being, given that her departure from the group would inhibit her attendance at any future meditative instruction workshops. She kept contact with the group for a while, but that faded once it became clear to them that it would be difficult to conduct proper religious practices in her new place of residence with no Yiguan Dao temple within driving distance.

In contrast, Johnson experienced fewer problems leaving the field because the seasonal nature of migratory fishing dictated the departure of all participants once the salmon season ended. Actually, as a boat carpenter,
TABLE 3
Characteristics of Possible Active Social Roles Relevant to Participant Observation Research within Chinese and Taiwanese Ethnic Communities in South Orange County

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Freedom of Social Movement</th>
<th>Access to Information</th>
<th>Type of Informant Relations</th>
<th>Types of Information</th>
<th>Need for Specialized Knowledge</th>
<th>Neutral Status Ability</th>
<th>Information Reliability</th>
<th>Reliance on Key Informants</th>
<th>Entrance Probability</th>
<th>Accessibility to Organization/Setting Section</th>
<th>Power within Organization/Setting</th>
<th>Basis of Power</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Optometry store assistant</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>Moderately dependent</td>
<td>Diverse and superficial</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Assistance in finding glasses, contact lenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutor at university</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>Dependent</td>
<td>Diverse and detailed</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Knowledge/grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daoism disciple</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Diverse, but limited to group</td>
<td>Limited dependency</td>
<td>Diverse, but limited to group</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Fellow member of the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choir member (ballroom dance course member)</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Diverse, but limited to group</td>
<td>Limited dependency</td>
<td>Diverse, but limited to group</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Fellow member of the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of dance troupe performing at charity events</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Diverse, but limited to group</td>
<td>Limited dependency</td>
<td>Diverse, but limited to group</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderately high</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Fellow member of the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporter</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Superficial</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Public exposure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Less active&quot; ethnographer</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Difficult to establish</td>
<td>Superficial</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Money, favors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Johnson left the field after all the fishers had departed to close up camp (e.g., winterize the boats), thereby mostly avoiding feelings of guilt or self-doubt normally associated with departure from a fieldwork setting (e.g., leaving friends). Although certainly a concern, such feelings are a natural part of separation from the fieldwork context. They are not exclusive to an active participant-observer approach and can be experienced by any ethnographer independent of his or her level of actual participation (see Adler and Adler 1987 for a good discussion of these issues with respect to varying levels of participation).

Active involvement in a social system does have the potential to increase the problems associated with being a “reflective person.” However, the possibility of such an occurrence can be used as one additional factor for assessing the attributes of potential active roles available to the ethnographer. Thus, a variable such as, for example, reflective potential could be included in an analysis and would aid in not only selecting an active role but also in determining and planning fieldwork exit strategies as they relate to such concerns.

We have focused little to this point on some of the ethical issues that arise from the types of research discussed here. Ever since ethnographers began attempts to “fit in” or reduce the social distance between them and their informants, such ethical concerns have become prominent (Whyte 1984; Emerson 2001). Probably the most obvious issue for this article is what Patton (1986) termed the portrayal of role in participant observation that basically relates to the extent to which people know they are being studied. Portrayal ranges from the overt (where people know they are being observed) to the covert (where people do not know they are being observed), with various other forms in between. The Johnson and Weatherford studies were done in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when there were different rules and guidelines for research. It is certainly the case that the Weatherford study would be done differently if proposed today. However, this does not mean that the role approach described here would be any less effective if Weatherford had chosen to portray himself more overtly. As the Johnson example illustrated, his complete openness as to his research intentions seemed to have little impact on the interactions and interviews with the fishers in the camp in that his role as carpenter far outweighed his role as researcher or ethnographer. We suspect this would probably have been the case with the Weatherford study as well. With respect to the conduct of participant observation research, whether as discussed here or by others, we strongly advocate following all the current guidelines for protection of study participants. To this end, an additional advantage of the matrix approach described here is that it allows for the inclusion of ethical matters into any assessment of potential active roles an ethnographer might consider (e.g., access to illegal information).
In sum, we have presented a framework for analyzing features of potential active participant-observer roles in the field that are useful for the collection of ethnographic data. Ethnography in contemporary settings increasingly involves the study of people in one’s own culture in settings that, for example, often stress work and display spatial diffuseness and ethnic heterogeneity. In such contexts, the ethnographer’s ability to develop a social role that is recognizable by the community may be particularly important. In some contexts, active participation may be a prerequisite to the ultimate success of the study. In either case, an a priori theoretically framed understanding of the possible active roles an ethnographer can realistically fill in a given ethnographic setting will help lessen the anxieties associated with field research and help ensure the collection of good, reliable data.

REFERENCES


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