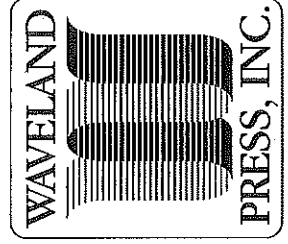


second edition

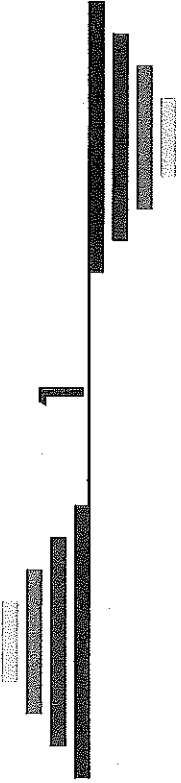
Doing Cultural Anthropology

projects for ethnographic data collection

Michael V. Angrosino
University of South Florida



Long Grove, Illinois



Becoming a Participant Observer

Gerry Tierney

A RESEARCH PROJECT

When I was a graduate student, the time came when I had to think about my dissertation research project. I knew that I wanted to design a project that would give me some insight into the daily lives of homeless people and I realized that the only way I could delve into those lives would be to live in the field. I had done some preliminary research in a homeless shelter in New York City, but ultimately decided to conduct my research in Anchorage, Alaska, a city where I had lived for twenty years and which I considered my home. When I was an undergraduate at the University of Alaska-Anchorage, I became interested in the indigenous people living in the metropolitan area. One of my professors, Linda Ellana, took me on a tour of the infamous Fourth Avenue area, the Skid Row of Anchorage, a street packed with seedy bars. Dr. Ellana was an expert on the Alaska Eskimos; she had lived in native villages and understood the value of experiencing the lives of people in their

own setting. But she stressed the importance of understanding what is going on in your own backyard before thinking about going off to exotic places, as traditional anthropologists were supposed to do. She made me realize how fortunate we were to have indigenous people right in our backyard.

That night on Skid Row gave me many insights into a world that was previously hidden from my view, a world that was surprisingly viable, populated by people who were managing to survive despite great odds. That experience convinced me that whatever research I ultimately undertook, it would have to include participant observation in the daily lives of the people I wanted to study. And so I returned to Anchorage for my dissertation research.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AS A TOOL OF ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

When I began my Fourth Avenue research I felt confident in my training in the skills of social research. On the other hand, I was frightened about entering this world. I would not be passing through, as was the case in New York, nor would I be there only for a brief tour under the supervision of a knowledgeable professor. I would be there essentially on my own for an extended period of time.

At first, my primary activity was just hanging out. I was usually quite comfortable doing so and I watched every little thing, always listening to the sounds of the street, a world that was slowly opening up to me. Through these means, I built some trust among the people and gained their cooperation in helping me learn about them and their activities. The only time I felt uncomfortable was when the tables were turned and people on the street took to watching me and asking me a variety of personal questions. During the first few weeks it became clear to me that I was the oddity on the street and that I was being observed and scrutinized with as much intensity as I myself employed while watching them.

Engaging people in conversation took a little more time, but it too eventually became an everyday activity. In this manner, I was able to begin hearing about my informants' views. I was also able to develop relationships with people that enabled me to interview them about aspects of their lives. One woman, an Eskimo, became a particularly good informant. She shared her life history with me, although she occasionally reminded me that there were some details of her life that she did not want published. ("This is for your ears only," she would tell me from time to time.) She was a woman with a rare and engaging sense of humor. She would frequently annoy me when she would announce in a voice loud enough for everyone in the shelter to hear, "Watch it! She writes." She did so with a twinkle in her eye and a hearty,

infectious laugh. We developed a relationship based on mutual respect and trust. Being a participant in as well as an observer of the lives of people means that one has a responsibility to protect the integrity of those with whom one interacts.

My goal was to describe the everyday activities of a group of homeless people, with a focus on women. I wanted to know everything I could about the individuals who inhabited Anchorage's Skid Row. I wanted to know what it felt like to live in public places, how people could survive in such a seemingly hostile environment, and how they managed to get some enjoyment out of life all the same. These goals required not only an understanding of research methodology, but also a particular mind-set, a desire to see the world from the insiders' perspective. It is no accident that participant observation is the strategy used most often by ethnographic researchers to uncover the world views of people from cultures other than their own. While participant observation is certainly not necessary for all kinds of social research projects, it is an important technique for anyone hoping to develop relationships with, and not merely gather information from, those under study. In addition to hoping to write a scholarly dissertation, I wanted to be in a position to make some recommendations for the improvement of services to the homeless. I knew that my suggestions would have greater weight if I had lived through the relevant experiences so that I had a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the needs that the people themselves expressed.

I knew that I could not hope to see the everyday world of Skid Row women from their own perspective unless I shared that world with them over the course of time. To be sure, I was not able to participate completely, as some of the activities engaged in by street people are illegal and dangerous, especially for a woman. Nevertheless, the participant observation that I could do opened up the world of the homeless for me. In many ways, it is a world very much like my own, a world in which people have to be innovative, skillful, and clever if they want to survive. But the specific challenges to their capacities were ones that I had to learn about from the inside.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION: A BRIEF HISTORY

Prior to the nineteenth century, people interested in learning about foreign cultures had to read the second-hand accounts of missionaries, merchants, or other travelers. Many of these observations were ethnocentric, biased in favor of the culture from which the travelers came and tending to characterize foreigners as primitive or backward.

One of the first important observers of a non-Western culture to attempt to participate in that culture and understand it on its own terms was Henry Schoolcraft, a government agent working among the Chippewa Indians of

One of the biggest shocks for me in the field was the realization that I would have to spend a prolonged period of time living among people so seemingly different from me. I was not really prepared to deal with my own foibles and negative characteristics, but I had to do so—unless I understood myself better, I could not hope to bridge the perceived gap between myself and the people I was learning about. Fieldwork based on participant observation is a two-way street: just as I had expectations of the people (that they would share their experiences with me and honestly answer my questions), so they had expectations of me (to be honest and forthcoming about myself and my motives).

When you live for an extended period of time with people who seem to be very different from yourself, it is a good idea to watch out for feelings of superiority. While feelings of unease, suspicion, even a bit of hostility are only natural, they must be dealt with forthrightly and consciously set aside, lest they color the research in unwanted, negative ways. Indeed, the process of building rapport took up the bulk of my time early in the project, as I had to learn not only what the people I was studying were like, but also what I was like. People did not always want to be bothered by my silly questions and I had to learn that my own agenda, as important as it was for me, was not the only agenda that had to be acknowledged and dealt with.

As I reflect on my field experiences, I realize that another important aspect of fieldwork for me was that I was somewhat naïve. Some anthropologists go so far as to advocate cultivating naïveté. I am not sure one can consciously do so; perhaps it is sufficient simply to use the naïveté with which most of us come equipped and not try to overcome it or overcompensate for it. A certain degree of humility is required to do so. It is not, after all, easy to be in the position of one who appears to be constantly in the dark about even the simplest situations. Putting yourself in the position of the student, letting insiders teach you about the intricacies of their culture, is sometimes difficult, but in the end it pays off. You may, of course, have more “book learning” than they (i.e., you will almost certainly have read the available literature on the culture before beginning your fieldwork), but you cannot hope to see the world as they do if you constantly impose an “I know better because I read the book” attitude on every encounter. In my own case, the street people had long since learned that university types tended to be haughty, arrogant, rude, useless, and not very bright about survival on the streets. They frequently told me that nothing good ever came from one of the seemingly countless studies conducted on the streets of Anchorage. My willingness to be humble made me a much more acceptable presence.

It is also important to cultivate a sense of humor, which can help you put yourself and your work in an appropriate perspective. Extended fieldwork can be tedious at times, exhausting at others. Appreciating the ludicrous or incongruous aspects of the work can be a great blessing. When I was on the street in Anchorage, I learned how important a sense of humor was for the native people who became my friends. I was raised in a somber,

the upper Great Lakes region in the 1820s and 1830s. Most Indian agents of that era had little interest in or respect for the native cultures, but Schoolcraft was cut from a different cloth. He learned the Chippewa language and lived in the villages and ultimately shared his intimate, encyclopedic knowledge of the culture in a series of books that detailed the history, traditions, customs, language, and social institutions of the people. He became a friend of many people in the villages, and on occasion found himself in the position of a political advocate who argued on behalf of Indian causes.

Although Schoolcraft was not a trained anthropologist, his work among the Chippewa illustrates the major aspects of what was to become formally recognized as the participant observation approach to ethnographic research. Participant observation is not simply a matter of living in close proximity to the people one wishes to study; after all, traders and missionaries often lived among the Indians, but made little or no effort to understand their culture in all its complexity. Participant observation is not just the collection of data, but a way of thinking about the people from whom one collects those data. It is also a way in which one perceives one's own position in relation to the people and the culture one is studying. Cultural relativism is a philosophical position that goes hand in hand with participant observation; its major premise is that no culture is superior to any other, and that each culture must be understood and evaluated in its own terms. Later in the nineteenth century, anthropologists in both Britain (e.g., Bronislaw Malinowski) and the United States (e.g., Franz Boas and his students, among whom perhaps the most famous was Margaret Mead) formalized the participant observation strategy and the principle of cultural relativism and made them the centerpieces of scientific ethnographic research.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION: THE PROCESS

The Skills of a Participant Observer

When I first read that some of the major skills involved in participant observation were watching and listening, I knew that this mainstay of anthropology was well suited not only for my project, but also for my personality. I am a patient person in most respects and I enjoy interacting with a variety of people. Before I entered the field, however, I really did not appreciate the importance of interacting with and getting along with people who, it turned out, would be active participants in my project. My training had always emphasized the activities of the researcher; I had to learn through experience that people from other cultures are not pliable puppets performing for me as a researcher; they are living human beings who quite often demand something in return from the researcher.

14 Doing Cultural Anthropology

puritanical, Irish Catholic household in Massachusetts. My sense of humor was never allowed to blossom; indeed, any kind of levity was looked upon with a great deal of suspicion. Early in my research, however, an Eskimo man pointed out that I never laughed out loud. He observed that I would smile and say, "That's funny," which he thought was very peculiar behavior. When I saw myself through their eyes I realized how strange I must have seemed and I made real efforts to lighten up and share a good laugh with my friends.

One additional skill is necessary for a good participant observer: writing. It is most important for you to write down, sometimes in excruciating detail, all your observations. Doing so has become much easier since the advent of computers, but it still takes time, discipline, and organization to sit down and write at length, every day. So if you do not like to write, or think you are not a very good writer, be sure to take time to practice before you enter the field.

The Stages of Participant Observation

The first step is to decide on a topic. Doing so may sound simple, but because it is a great, big world, and anything human in it is fair game for an ethnographer, it can be difficult to narrow your focus down to something you can actually do. One good way to begin is to read about projects carried out by other researchers; you may wish to duplicate one of them in your own area, or you may wish to follow up on some suggestion an author has made. It is important to read as much as possible so that you can identify gaps in the literature, trying to fill in some area of knowledge not already well established. For example, when I began immersing myself in the literature on homelessness, I was struck by the fact that almost all of it dealt with men; there were surely homeless women, but we knew very little about them at that time. Choosing a topic and choosing a site for research are linked processes. In my own case, my prior interest in Alaska natives confirmed my decision to study homeless women in Anchorage rather than in New York.

Selecting a site is not, however, the same thing as gaining entrance. One does not simply show up somewhere and commence participant observation. It is usually desirable to have some trusted person or institution in the community you want to study help introduce you to the people. In my case, I decided to contact a homeless shelter and inquire about the possibility of serving in some capacity as a volunteer while I conducted research. The director of the shelter responded favorably. Nevertheless, my first day in the field was still stressful and anxiety-provoking. It was a very cold January day, and since the shelter did not open until late afternoon, I thought that would just hang around on Fourth Avenue to observe. You might think that a person who had lived most of her life in Alaska would have known better! It is just too cold to be outdoors in January. So I found a fast-food restaurant located right across the street from Skid Row. I drank a lot of coffee

and ate a lot of French fries that day. I also felt depressed and wondered what I could have been thinking of to put myself in this awkward position. I found myself gazing off to the beautiful, snow-capped Chugach Mountains, and wondering, "What am I doing here?" I had some doubts about my ability to carry out the project. Anthropologists refer to such emotions as "culture shock."

Things did not get much better once I finally got to the shelter. The director was not on the premises when I arrived, and no one else seemed to know who I was or what I was doing there. So I just sat there trying not to look conspicuous. I continued to be plagued by feelings of inadequacy. Finally, a woman who worked in the kitchen approached me and graciously invited me to join her for a cup of coffee while she prepared the evening meal. She saved me from the stares of all the people entering the shelter and she eventually became one of my best friends. She was a Roman Catholic nun who was the only paid female employee providing direct services at the shelter. She was also the only advocate for women at this particular shelter—a role that, alas, led to her abrupt dismissal just a few months later.

And so with a great deal of frustration, I began what would be a field experience of six months' duration. This first day was not typical of the days that followed, but the major problem became quite clear to me on that day: I would have to interact with these people at the shelter on a daily basis and participate in their daily activities. It was a frightening prospect because I was not at all sure I had what it would take to complete the project.

One of the most difficult aspects of the work was a lack of privacy. I was almost always surrounded by people. After people got over the novelty of seeing me hanging around all the time, they began to treat me like an insider. On one level this sounds like a good thing, but it was troubling in some ways, in that I was treated like many of the women on the street—that is, as a person targeted for sexual abuse. Being a street woman meant that you were subject to a daily diet of sexual jokes, advances, inappropriate touching, harassment, and other forms of abuse at the hands of a variety of males—not just homeless men, but also men who were supposed to protect and serve them, such as police officers and social workers. It was important to have a sense of myself and to set limits about what I could, or would, participate in.

Although scientific research is expected to be objective, participant observation of necessity introduces a degree of subjectivity into the process. When you spend a considerable amount of time in the field with people, you grow close to certain individuals. One woman in particular was very intelligent; without her assistance I would not have understood much of what went on in the shelter and on the streets. This woman, Mariah, was not just an "informant," but a friend. Over the years when I return to Anchorage, she always throws her arms around me to welcome me back. I would not have been able to have conducted my research without Mariah; she may not always have understood why I wanted to be part of their lives, but she was

always most generous in sharing herself with me. Participant observation is always a joint effort and it requires mutual trust and respect.

In warmer weather I would be on the streets until about 1:00 AM, at which time I returned to the shelter to write up my recollections of the day's activities. I carried a little notepad in my pocket at all times and I would frequently write down key words or phrases that I would use in the evening to remember as much as possible. It would usually take a few hours to write up even relatively brief daily notes, which would then be used to write more expanded commentaries after a week or so. At times I thought I was drowning in minutiae, but when I was finished with fieldwork and began to write my dissertation, I was very happy that I had tried to record every last detail.

That final write-up—whether it is a dissertation, or a more limited course assignment—entails more than writing; it is a process of thought and reflection as well. There is a lot of organizational work that needs to be done, as your notes are likely to be very extensive. You need to decide how to categorize the notes so that you can efficiently retrieve data on particular topics.

YOUR PROJECT

This project needs to begin early in the semester, as participant observation requires more than one or two visits to a site. It might take some time just to set up the project and obtain permission to work with the people you are interested in studying.

In choosing your topic, do not undertake fieldwork in a situation that makes you nervous or uncomfortable. This first project should be enjoyable. If you do not deal well with conflict or aggression, you may want to avoid fieldwork in a jail, police station, or even a homeless shelter. If you cannot stand the sight of blood, a hospital emergency room is not for you. If you are unsympathetic to organized religion, fieldwork in a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple might be unpleasant. On the other hand, those settings might be perfect for you, depending on your interests or emotional resources. Remember that even sites as apparently mundane as laundromats have made for very interesting ethnographies—use your imagination in selecting both a topic and a site. Some examples from my own students include observations in tattoo parlors, fire stations, and diners. Some of my students are older, working individuals who conduct research associated with their jobs or their children. For example, one student conducted fieldwork in her son's computer science lab at a local secondary school. She not only provided the school with a detailed study of computer lab use, but also included recommendations for increased usage.

Depending on the site you have selected, you may need to contact someone in the environment to see if you would be welcome to hang out

there. Some settings selected by my students (e.g., a day-care center) required very formal permission; others are more flexible, although it is always helpful to have someone who is already a trusted insider in that community be the one to introduce you to the others. If you choose some sort of service agency (e.g., a soup kitchen), you should consider volunteering some of your time, so that you are giving something back to both the staff and the clients and not simply hanging out selfishly doing your own thing. By all means, consult with your instructor regarding your school's norms for informed consent in projects such as this one.

Be prepared for some culture shock the first time you enter the field. Even if the place is familiar to you, you will be seeing it and interacting within it in very different ways. Whatever feelings of discomfort you may experience, try to remain as courteous as possible. Keep in mind that the people you are living/working among are providing you with both time and information. They are sharing part of their life with you, and without them you would have no project. Strive, therefore, to treat them with all due respect. An important part of showing respect is being honest about why you are there and what you are attempting to accomplish. If some people choose not to cooperate, do not take it as a personal affront; simply work with those who are more willing to interact with you.

Be sure to keep good notes. Depending on your personal preferences (and your resources), you may do so on index cards, a pad or notebook, or a Palm Pilot. Do not, however, spend all your time in the field with your nose buried in your notes. While you are in the field, use the cards or pads or other devices simply to jot down brief, simple reminders. You can flesh out these comments when you have some time to yourself. Do not put off that task, however, as you will lose many important details if you wait too long to transform the quick field note into a more circumstantial description.

Your final report should include a map of the environment you have been studying, as well as a detailed narrative description of the site. Do not take too much for granted (even if you are studying a very commonplace site); write your description as if for an audience of readers who are not familiar with the setting at all. You can then go on to write an interpretive analysis of what is going on in the environment, based in part on your own readings (how does this material conform to what I have read about other similar settings? how does it differ? why?) and on what your informants tell you about their own insights into their experiences. For example, one of my students chose to observe a local mosque; what particularly struck her was the way in which gender roles were played out in worship services and this aspect of the culture formed the core of her analysis.

Your report may also include photographs or sketches (if you have obtained the people's permission to use them), transcripts of interviews, or materials pertinent to the site under study (e.g., brochures produced by a civic organization). By all means feel free to include any insights you have gleaned about your own personality in conducting this research.

