In "Participant Observation, A guide for Fieldworkers" by DeWalt and DeWalt (2002)

4

Doing Participant Observation: Becoming an Observer

"Of course, all crises are grist for the ethnographer's mill—if he himself is not ground in." (Benjamin Paul 1953, 440)

While developing an effective participant role is critical to the method of participant observation, it is not a tool of research unless the participant is also an effective observer. In this chapter we will discuss some of the specific skills and details of observation that fieldworkers use to understand people's daily lives, relationships, social organization, values, and expectations.

It is a joke among anthropologists that, when we have caught an obvious event in everyday life, we point out that we are "trained observers," therefore far more adept than the average individual at capturing nuance. Of course, our peers also cast it up to us when we miss an obvious event, with the implication that we would be truly abysmal observers if we were not trained. Our joke, however, is based on our real assumption that people can be trained, or can train themselves to be better, more detailed, more objective observers. People do vary with respect to their attentiveness to detail, and their ability to recall detail. Remember that Mead (1953) included innate sensitivity to events as one of the characteristics a would-be researcher should assess before embarking on fieldwork. Anyone, however, can improve the degree to which she/he attends to detail, remembers detail, and, perhaps most importantly, records detail. But, as Wolcott (1994) notes, this is not a very easy thing to convey to others. There is much discussion about *what* a participant observer will observe (initially, everything; later, a representative selection of events and situations), but not *how* one should observe.

In fact, in reviewing a number of discussions of participant observation as a method and fieldwork accounts, we found that descriptions of how researchers developed their abilities to become better observers are rare. Researchers have spent more time describing the nuances of

successfully taking the role of participant than they have the concrete details of observing and recording observation. At the same time the literature is full of descriptions of the "aha!" moments when the researcher notes that "suddenly it dawned on me," or "then I realized . . ." That is, the moments in fieldwork in which the researcher came to understand what he/she was observing, but more about that below. In part, this is because, as we noted in an earlier chapter, a good deal of what we learn in the field is tacit. The process of participant observation is, in part, a process of *enculturation* (cf. Schensul et al. 1999). The researcher gradually absorbs the big picture and some of the details that lead to an understanding of people's daily lives, structure of events, social structure, and expectations and values. However, even the gradual development of understanding is based on the accumulation of observations of daily routines, specific events, and conversation, to which the observer has carefully attended and captured in field notes.

At its most basic, observation is just that: the researcher explicitly and self-consciously attending to the events and people in the context they are studying. It is not just a visual phenomenon, but includes all of the senses. "Observation thus consists of gathering impressions of the surrounding world through all relevant human faculties" (Adler and Adler 1994, 378). In participant observation, especially, it also includes a kind of self-observation, both of the way in which the investigator experiences the setting as a participant, the particular values and biases she/he brings to the setting (reflexivity); and observation of the impact of the observer on the research setting. In this chapter, we discuss some of the practical steps that should be taken in order for an individual to develop his/her observational skills.

The Role of Theory and Conceptual Frameworks

As we noted in earlier chapters and above and will discuss again in chapter 9, the theoretical framework with which we enter the field is one of the key influences in what we will observe and record. While in an earlier time researchers were often trained (or not trained) to go into the field with no preconceived theories or expectations, most researchers now enter the field with well-defined and specific research questions, well-thought-out theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and ideas about social structure, social interaction systems, power relations, networks, etc. Even before entering the field, researchers have thought carefully about what kinds of individuals they will seek out, which venues for observation they will try to attend, what kinds of events they will observe. While the participant observer is learning to become a participant, he/she is also trying to iden-

tify the specific actions and products of action that are *indicators* of key concepts and components of a conceptual framework.

Taking the Observer Role

We find that, after years of experience, we probably observe many situations more closely and more analytically than our noninvestigator friends and colleagues. However, we also observe better when we are consciously carrying out fieldwork; when we define ourselves as being "on"; when we are thinking of what will go into the field notes. In a way similar to choosing and taking on a participant role, the participant observer self-consciously takes on the role of observer as well. In fact, the need to be observing, and observing effectively, is one of the strains early in fieldwork that can lead to the experience of culture shock. We find that when we are "on" we have in the back of our minds the fact that, whether or not we are taking cursory notes at the time of the observation, we will be writing field notes later. Keeping consciously in mind that we will have to describe what we did and saw in itself keeps us attuned to the detail of the context.

Attending to Detail: Mapping the Scene

The most important skill the participant observer needs to develop is the ability to attend to details. Effective observation means "seeing" as much as possible in any situation. This can include noting the arrangement of physical space, the arrangement of people within that space, the specific activities and movement of people in a scene, the interaction among people in the scene (and with the researcher), the specific words spoken, and nonverbal interaction, including facial expressions.

It is a good idea to map the scenes in which the researcher is participating. Whyte (Whyte and Whyte 1984) wrote about the importance of constructing maps of the interactions in the Cornerville S&A Club. Whyte was interested in studying political and social relations in this community, the structure of action, and the formation and composition of subgroups. He hypothesized that the men who associated most with each other would be allies when it was time to make decisions. He needed to understand the interactions of members of the club in more depth. One of the tools he used to do this was to construct positional maps of club meetings he observed. Some of this he did surreptitiously. He could see into the room in which the club met from the front window of his apartment.

> I simply adjusted the venetian blind so I was hidden from view and I could look down and into the store-front club. Unfortunately, however, our flat was two flights up, and the angle of vision was such that I could not see past the middle of the clubroom. To get the full picture, I had to go across the street and be with the men. (85)

While at the club meetings Whyte observed "who was talking together, playing cards together, or otherwise interacting" (86). As he knew the "regulars" well after months of interacting with them, he was able to easily remember who was talking with whom, etc. He made mental pictures of men in relation to the physical objects in the room. He counted the number of people in the scene. He made mental notes of movements around the room. When the scene changed, when people moved around, he went through the same mental processes again. However, Whyte could not keep all this reliably in mind at first.

> I managed to make a few notes on trips to the men's room, but most of the mapping was done from memory after I got home. At first, I went home once or twice for mapmaking during the evening. But, with practice, I got so that I could retain at least two positional arrangements in memory and could do all of my notes at the end of the evening. (86)

Whyte's description of his observation of the club makes several important points:

1. mapping the physical and social scene provides important data for understanding social relationships;
2. mapping is a very good tool for developing the kind of attention to detail and memory that truly effective fieldwork requires; and
3. we all get better at this with practice.

Mapping the scene is a fairly common tool of observation.[1] Pelto also describes how he came to a better understanding of social relationships among members of several communities by mapping a reindeer roundup in Finnish Lapland (Pelto and Pelto 1978).

> We found in our first exposure to a reindeer roundup, that mapping the physical structure of the corral and nearby dwelling units provided a nearly complete outline of the structure of the social interaction taking place . . . the first observation to be made about these cubicles is that the Skolt Saame positions tend to be bunched together on one side of the corral, although the segmentation of Skolts from other groups is not complete. Second the cubicles of any one reindeer association tend to be together and the relative positions of the associations are visible in the organization of the

> cubicles . . . The positions of the cubicles in this case correspond to both the social and territorial placement of these people. (Of course, the verification of the social observations comes from intensive field work in other contexts.) (201–2)

Creating the map and attending to the details of position and interaction allowed Pelto to draw important conclusions regarding social relations, ethnic interaction, and political and economic power.

In addition to mapping the physical and social scene, Pelto also observed and recorded a running record of the activities of the roundup as they occurred. He does not tell us if he took running jot notes, periodically left the scene to take notes, or was able to commit all of this to memory and write up the notes later. But the information gained through participating in the roundup became a key part of the description of economic and social relationships among various Saame groups and Finns.

In a study of women's social power in Ecuador (DeWalt 1999; Poats and DeWalt 1999) we were interested in the ways in which women and men interacted in community meetings. We attended a sample of community meetings in four communities, observing who spoke, whose opinions appeared to influence discussion, and the ways in which decisions were reached. We also made sketch maps of who was sitting and standing, where men and women were seated, where specific individuals we believed were community leaders were seated, and where speakers were sitting or standing. Figure 8.1 (page 145) shows a rough sketch map captured in jot notes during one particular meeting in one of the study communities. Our notes regarding who spoke showed equal participation by men and women. However, the sketch map shows an all-male cluster seated apart from other members of the community. While they were not officers of the organization (the officers were seated in a cluster at the head table and were both men and women), by attending to where decisions were being made, it became clear that all decisions were being made within the cluster of men. In community-based research we have always begun the process by making maps of the community, position of houses, public spaces, and services. There are several good reviews of concepts and techniques for community mapping available (Kuznar and Werner 2001; Cromley 1999; van Willigen and DeWalt 1985; Spier 1970). Increasingly, community-based maps are available from census bureaus, geographic services, and land management agencies. It is also increasingly easy to secure aerial photos and remote sensing images of regions and communities. All of these can be used as bases for community maps. In some, individual structures such as houses and community spaces can be identified. Others provide a backdrop on which structures can be mapped in more detail.

Mapping social scenes and spatial layouts of living and working spaces not only serves as a physical record of observation, it is a tool to focus observation. It forces the researcher to observe more carefully and with greater detail.

Mapping can also be a means of defining the study area, understanding and analyzing the geographical distribution of community members, describing the activity spaces (as compared with living spaces) in a community, and identifying locational problems inherent in the research area (Cromley 1999).

Finally, mapping can be a means of doing something useful while learning a language or while building rapport. One of the first things we encourage our students to do when entering the field is to do a sketch map of the community (see van Willigen and DeWalt 1985, 42–45). This serves a number of purposes. It gets them acquainted with the physical surroundings and settlement pattern of the community. Walking around the community also makes you visible so people become accustomed to seeing strangers in their midst. In addition, there are lots of opportunities for informal conversations while mapping that encourage students to get over their shyness and to begin interacting on a regular basis with people in the community.

Counting

Participant observation is often described as the quintessential qualitative research method, and, in fact, it is. However, that does not mean that no quantitative data can or should be collected. All researchers make some quantitative statements such as "very few people attended the meeting," "many children miss school because they are taking care of the animals," "most of the vendors are women," etc. In fact counting, both during events and activities and later in analysis, can be a key component of improving the level of description and objectivity of observation. Counting can take place in every situation. How many of what kind of people are in a particular setting? How many are doing what? How many men as compared with women as compared with children are acting, moving, speaking? How many chairs, chickens, cows, cars, corporate executives are present? In other words, the researcher should train him/herself to count people, things, and actions in all sorts of routine and everyday events and activities. Seemingly trivial "countings" can form the basis of later conclusions regarding change over time, or differences in distributions of things and actions across subgroups.

One of the first training assignments given us as beginning researchers was to observe the weekly market in the Mexican community in which

we were living. Although we had only rudimentary Spanish during our first field trip, careful observation was a useful thing for us to do that did not require verbal skills. However, we were not just to observe, but to count the number of sellers of each kind of good, count the people, count the number of people without shoes, etc. There is a big difference between being able to report that the majority of sellers are women, and to report that 60 percent of the stalls were attended by adult women, 30 percent by adult men, and 10 percent by children; or that 15 percent of the people in the food section of the market were without shoes and only 5 percent in the clothing section were without shoes.

Some people are natural counters. We realized this one day when an acquaintance stopped by our home in the United States to pick something up. As she walked in the door she noted that the door (which was original to our 100-year-old bungalow) had thirty small panes of glass. We had lived in the house several years and could not have told anyone how many panes there were if asked. Since then, we have met a number of natural counters. Such people immediately note how many chairs are set up in a room, how many groups of people there are, how many pounding strokes it takes a woman to reduce a pile of corn into meal. Unfortunately, neither of us is a natural counter. We have to consciously think about the importance of counting people and things. The effective observer can cultivate the habit of counting, and either record the count immediately or commit it to memory for later inclusion in field notes.

At this point, the new researcher might well ask: How much recorded detail is enough? The very best answer is: there is *never* enough. One could observe the same event for hours or days, or a hundred times, with all of the very best powers of observation, and still find something new each moment or time. However, this is not a reasonable approach. There are diminishing returns, even to the time spent in observing and recording observations in field notes of a single event. Also, the researcher carrying out extended fieldwork will likely have more opportunities to observe and participate in similar events and activities. As in most aspects of fieldwork, the researcher does the best he/she can at a particular time and in a particular setting.

With mental mapping, counting, actively listening, and keeping a running mental stream of observation, observing complex events as a researcher can seem to be an overwhelming experience, especially for a new researcher. To be truthful, it is. But with time, practice, and experience it is not only possible but likely that most researchers will do it well, certainly well enough.

Attending to Conversation

The participant observer is also attending carefully to what is being said. We will discuss informal interviewing in more detail below. However, much of the time a researcher is participating in an event or activity, she/he is also engaged in active listening. Active listening is listening attentively, using casual facilitation techniques (see chapter 7), making mental (sometimes written) notes about the conversation(s), and *sometimes* being prepared to offer a prompt when an aspect of the conversation touches on material important to the researcher but when the information being offered is not entirely clear to the researcher. With respect to the last point, it is sometimes a good idea to let a point pass, with a mental note to follow up on it in a more directed interview later rather than break the normal flow of conversation when hanging out.

Even in participant observation, as compared with informal interviewing, the written record should contain as much verbatim conversation as possible. Realistically, however, unless the researcher is making rather detailed jot notes, or audio- or videotaping while interacting, reproducing much of any verbatim conversation will be difficult.[2]

We have found that doing detailed field notes (see chapter 8) is an important means of training one's mind. As one replays (in the mind) and recounts (in field notes) conversations and events, many different details emerge than when one just simply participates. Although neither one of us seems to be able to remember even the main topics of conversations as we go through our daily academic lives (and this is definitely getting worse as we age), when we are "on" in the field, we can write pages of detailed field notes, often capturing people's verbal and nonverbal expressions.

Nonverbal expression and gestures are also important to understanding what is going on. Attention to detail in observation should also include noting nonverbal cues and communication.

Seeing Old Events with New Eyes

The participant observer in a new scene may often feel overwhelmed by the complexity of events, the amount of new detail to be observed and recorded, and the difficulty of understanding exactly what is going on. As difficult as it seems at the outset, this situation is far easier to deal with than entering a scene after having participated in it as a native. While autoethnography (Reed-Danahay 1997) has a number of advantages, the researcher knowing at least parts of the context intimately, its major disadvantage is that it is difficult to attend to the level of detail necessary to gain new insight, when the context is so familiar. Furthermore, the naïve

observer not only sees detail the native does not, but also does not take many things, including social relations, for granted.

Through many years of teaching field methods to students, we have found that the students who write the poorest field notes at the outset are those who are carrying out their project in a familiar context. They have to see their world with new eyes. Our approach to working with students with this problem is to force them to take detailed jot notes and later write extensive field notes about things that seem obvious to them. We require them to make spatial maps, map out interactions, and take notes as though they were carrying out running observations.[3] Invariably we find that when they review their notes they find aspects of the scene they had not "seen" before.

While this is quite true of native researchers, it can also be a problem with fieldworkers who have been in a context for some time and are observing and participating in the hundredth occurrence of an event or activity. As we note in chapter 8, the researcher who has been in the field for some time runs the risk of not looking carefully enough for new insights; not seeing contradictory material; not seeking out new explanations for phenomena. It is a good idea to go back to basic observational techniques later in fieldwork, just as a self-check on the potential effects of ennui.

Practicing and Improving Observation and Memory

Over the years, we have seen and used a number of exercises to help new researchers improve the level of detail they observe and record. One such technique is not worrying about memory but keeping a running observational record. This is a technique used in some types of structured observation, but can be used to improve observation of detail. The researcher observes an event or activity keeping a running record, writing a stream of observation record. Every observed action, conversation, and expression is recorded while in the scene. This can be done in written form or even audiotaped, if it is possible in the particular context chosen. The goal is to see how much the researcher can observe in a certain period.

Several researchers can observe the same event or activity, keep a record, and then compare records. It is a humbling experience to realize that each observer attends to different aspects of the context, but the comparison can help each to be more attentive to aspects of events they have a tendency to miss. We do enough team research ourselves to continue to use this technique to keep up our skills and check the accuracy of our observation and recording. When more than one team member is in a particular event or activity, each writes his/her own set of field notes and then circulates them to the other researchers. Discrepancies can be

discussed and, if possible, resolved. Otherwise differences in observation are noted in analysis.

New researchers should have the opportunity to carry out observations in a context in which someone reviews field notes and critiques them for content and detail.[4] This is much of what happens in the field methods courses we teach. Again, as in team research, experienced researchers can continue to circulate field notes to their colleagues for critiquing, using this as a check on detail and accuracy. Even the most experienced anthropologists can improve observational and recording skills when colleagues help by pointing out lacunae in the record.

The only key to improving memory is to practice observing, making mental notes, and then writing detailed notes. Being conscious that we will be writing notes seems to make remembering a bit easier. Each one of us has a natural limit on the capacity and accuracy of our memory, and, unfortunately, the capacity appears to change with time. We are strong believers in taking jot notes or even more detailed notes when the nature of the activity and the people involved will allow.

What to Observe

The tempting answer to the question "What should I observe?" is, "Everything." Not only is this not feasible, it is probably completely impossible. In chapter 6 we discuss the importance of choosing a representative set of activities and events in which to participate and observe. What kinds of activities and events in which to participate and observe are also influenced by the specific research questions addressed and theoretical approach adopted for any particular piece of fieldwork. Participant observation is an iterative process, so a list of the events and situations that one will observe will change over time. What is observed in a particular setting will also be shaped by the interests of the observer (see below). All observation is partial (Agar 1996; Wolcott 1999).

Most of the activities that researchers record in their notebooks consist of mundane, frequently repeated events. That is one of the underlying assumptions in almost all social science studies: There are patterned behaviors, embodying and exemplifying culturally significant behaviors. Many behavior patterns are daily events—eating, washing, caring for the animals, caring for the children, going to school, going to regular jobs, and so on. Others are weekly— weekly market, weekend activities, reading the Sunday newspaper. Still others are repeated several times, or hundreds of times, daily, such as store transactions or physician-client interactions. On the other hand, every field worker also experiences very unusual events—some of them periodic, others unpredicted and aperiodic (such as police raids, floods, or gang fights).

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The participant observer should do the following:

1. Observe the activity and study the "story line."
2. Identify the component segments of action.
3. Try to sort out the regular, nonvarying components from the more variable items.
4. Look for variations in the "story line" that reflect differences in socioeconomic status, education, ethnicity, seasonality, etc.
5. Look for "exceptions" (e.g., "mistakes," "poor manners," "insults," etc.)
6. If the observed behavior is important for one's theoretical purposes, then the researcher should develop a plan for systematic observation, including an estimate of how many observations will be "enough" (depending on the degrees of regularity and "structuredness" of the behavior).

One of the inherent biases in observation, especially participant observation, is the likelihood that unusual and rare events will be more closely observed and recorded than commonplace events and activities. The compelling nature of unusual events and situations can lead to a bias in which they are more likely to influence analysis and dominate description. Events, activities, and situations experienced early in fieldwork are also likely to take a more central place in analysis and write-up.

It is also common that the researcher, after having participated in an event and activity one or two times, tends not to seek out opportunities to participate again but "moves on" to other events. In this case, there is less opportunity to compare the way similar events unfold on different days, under different circumstances, and at different times of the year. To take one simple example of the problems this might cause, there is the everyday consumption of food. Because we and the people we study do it several times a day, it may not be noteworthy to include what foods are consumed at every meal. Yet, nutritional anthropologists know that the "seasonality" of food (i.e., what foods are available and when they are consumed) may be critically important. Not having certain foods available can lead to nutritional deficiencies and/or health effects in a population. The point is that the researcher should continue observing commonplace events over time throughout the course of the project.

One of the other key uses of observation is to allow for the juxtaposition of what people say they do, and what they are observed to do, as part of analysis (Agar 1996). For example, Bill and his students have had experience in studying agricultural credit programs in Latin America in which development banks provided fertilizer to farmers to use in

producing cash crops. While farmers reported using the fertilizer for its intended purpose, observation showed that farmers were either using the fertilizer on subsistence crops or selling it. Knowing this, further investigation was able to show that farmers did not see it as being in their economic best interests to produce the cash crop. For them, the cash benefits of selling the fertilizer or using it to produce food for their families was a better use of the resource.

It is also important for the researcher to observe and experience those activities and events that are core to the processes the researcher hopes to describe and interpret. Eileen Van Schaik (1992), who carried out a study of workplace issues among Community Health Aides in rural Jamaica, collected a number of accounts in which the aides discussed the problems of fulfilling their obligation to visit the homes of their clients regularly using only public transportation. However, she never fully understood the concerns until she began traveling with the aides on local buses and could observe the constraints on mobility this imposed. Descriptions of events and activities that appear to be important to the research question should provide prompts for seeking opportunities to observe and participate. Going the other way around, observing events and activities carefully generally produces a number of questions that can be addressed through interviewing.

The researcher also needs to keep in mind that what she/he is observing changes with time in the field. What seems overwhelming at the beginning becomes much more manageable as the researcher has more information and observation. The nature of the enterprise changes from trying to observe and record *everything*, to one in which more attention is paid to new activities, or events that have an unusual twist, an aspect that the observer has not previously observed. One of the benefits of longer-term participant observation research is that we may get a chance to observe rare events. But more importantly, we are allowed to observe more as individuals, and communities become more comfortable with us in their midst and come to trust us. Wolcott (1994) notes that he portrayed one of his informants as a teetotaler in an early publication, only to find out after knowing the informant six years that, in fact, he did occasionally take a drink socially.

Some rare events may never be directly observed. Brymer notes that he spent years working with Mexican American "gangs" in a southwestern city before he saw a real gang meeting. Most of the time, the young men with whom he was working hung out in smaller groups (eight to ten guys) called *palomillas*. The large gangs that most people agreed existed actually came together only under unusual circumstances when it was thought that a fight with a rival gang would take place. In the case Brymer was able to observe, gang X was represented by a large number of heavily

armed young men and a number of women. No fight took place because gang Y never showed up, but the situation provided Brymer's only opportunity to observe a meeting of the larger gang.

Just Experiencing

We have just spent a good deal of time arguing that the participant observer should be consciously aware of observing most of the time in which he/she is engaged in research. However, one of the inherent contradictions in the method is that, sometimes, it is a good idea to "just experience" events. It is the tacit understandings and insights that being a participant brings to research that makes participant observation an important method. To the extent to which "being on" interferes with that experience, the researcher may sometimes need to lay aside the explicit observer role and attend not to remembering but to feeling and experiencing. The irony is that, after some experience as an observer who is "just participating," the experienced participant observer finds that she/he can come away from an afternoon off with the ability to write hours of field notes. In other words, the observer role becomes second nature, almost automatic.

Limits to Observation

Observer bias in what is observed, how it is observed, and how it is recorded is not limited to the method of participant observation. In addition to limitations to what will be observed as a result of the research questions and theoretical approach, personal attributes can substantially affect participant observation in field research. In chapter 5 we will discuss some of the constraints placed on observation by the gender of the researcher. Other personal characteristics include age, ethnic background, class, physical characteristics, etc. Post-modernist writers particularly emphasize that the observer and his or her circumstances and biases cannot be separated from the accounts that he/she writes. As a result, as Agar (1996) notes, all observations are partial. A different observer with different personal characteristics and interests is likely to report quite different aspects and dimensions of the same event.

In addition, ethnographers surely differ in terms of their abilities and qualifications. Until recently, however, it has been rare for the accuracy of field reports to be questioned. This is so despite an increasing number of controversies coming to light in which the data collected by different researchers who have worked in the same area differ substantially (e.g., Redfield [1930] and Lewis [1951] concerning Tepoztlan in Mexico, Mead

[1923] and Freeman [1983] on Samoa, Benedict [1934] and Barnouw [1963] on the Zuni). This acceptance of the reliability of data contrasts markedly with the controversies embroiling anthropology and other social science disciplines concerning the interpretation or theory built with the data.

Building theory, of course, depends on having reliable data, so it is lamentable that so little attention has been paid to the issues of reliability and validity of the information collected. The relatively small amount of formal examination of ethnographer bias in anthropology provides evidence that these issues merit much more attention than they have previously received.

Ethnographer Bias

The pioneering work on ethnographer bias was conducted by Raoul Naroll (1962, 1970) who became concerned that his cross-cultural research results may have been affected by systematic errors in ethnographic reporting. In the most striking finding, Naroll (1962, 88–89) found that the incidence of witchcraft reported in particular societies was related to the amount of time the ethnographer spent in the field. He showed that ethnographers who spent more than a year in the field were significantly more likely to report the presence of witchcraft beliefs among the societies they studied than ethnographers who spent shorter amounts of time in the field.

Our own research in Temascalcingo provided a striking personal confirmation of Naroll's finding. We have referred earlier to leaving the field for a three-week period of time after our first six months in the field. Before our brief hiatus, we had asked people many times about magic and witchcraft beliefs, particularly because these topics were so relevant to Kathleen's medical anthropological research. Everyone had denied that there were any such beliefs in the community. Almost the very day of our return, however, one of our key informants began regaling us with a recounting of a conflict that had occurred during our absence. The conflict included accusations by one of the parties that witchcraft was being used against them. During the remaining months in the field, witchcraft became a common theme of our conversations with people who had denied its existence before. We are convinced that the willingness of people to talk with us about such themes reflected a breakthrough in their level of confidence and comfort with us. Thus, as Naroll (1962) and we can attest, the length of time that a person spends engaged in participant observation does make a very large difference in the kind of findings that may be reported.

Controlling for sources of ethnographer bias has become increasingly common in cross-cultural research since Naroll's early work. Another example of the importance of ethnographer bias comes from the work of

Rohner, DeWalt, and Ness (1973). Their work focused on the effects of bias in reporting about parental acceptance/rejection and its importance in personality development in children and adults. One striking finding of these analyses was that those ethnographers who use multiple verification efforts report more parental rejection and other "negative" personality traits among the people they study. They reported that this seems to be linked to a "bias of romanticism" among anthropologists. Unless ethnographers use methods other than just participant observation, they are unlikely to report the negative aspects of their subjects' personalities and lives. They quoted Lévi-Strauss (1961, 381) who observed that "at home the anthropologist may be a natural subversive, a convinced opponent of traditional usage; but no sooner has he [sic] in focus a society different from his own than he becomes respectful of even the most conservative practices." This argues for a mix of methods in which participant observation is just one of the tools that anthropologists use in order to find out the behavior of the people they study.

The "quality " of participant observation will vary depending on the personal characteristics of ethnographers (e.g., gender, age, sexual orientation, ethnic affiliation), their training and experience (e.g., language ability, quality of training, etc.), and perhaps their theoretical orientation. As interpretive anthropology makes clear, all of us bring biases, predisposition, and hang-ups to the field with us and we cannot completely escape these as we view other cultures. Our reporting, however, should attempt to make these biases as explicit as possible so that others may use these in judging our work. What is also apparent, however, is that by utilizing more formal methods of data collection in conjunction with participant observation, we may improve the quality and consistency of our reporting.

Much of the recent trend in post-modernist writing in anthropology explicitly aims toward presenting both "the Self and Other . . . within a single narrative ethnography" (Tedlock 1991, 69). The point is often made that "objectivity" is not possible in the study of human behavior. While we can agree with this position, we do not accept the corollary that is often drawn that therefore we should not strive to improve our observational skills or search for explanatory theories concerning human behavior.[5] Understanding ourselves and our reactions to field research and the individuals we study should be a beginning point, not the final product of ethnography. Indeed, psychoanalysis was commonly used by anthropologists like Cora DuBois, Abram Kardiner, Ruth Benedict, and others both as a method of studying other cultures as well as a personal means for coming to terms with their own reactions to their research. They then went about the business of trying to construct social scientific explanations of peoples' behavior through ethnography. Our perspective is that

we should go beyond the individual post-modern musings that are too common in contemporary anthropology to more systematically examine how the anthropologist's race, gender, sexual preferences, and other factors affect their observations.

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter has explored different dimensions of becoming an observer. As we have shown, observational skills can be enhanced by attending to detail, mapping, counting, seeing old events with new eyes, and comparing observations with those of others. Although we acknowledge that there are limitations and biases in the observations made by any individual, we continue to believe that we can improve the quality of participant observation and that these observations can be used in comparative and theoretical social science. Explicit attention to sources of bias, and controlling for these, is a better approach than giving up on the scientific enterprise.

Notes

1. Doing this kind of mapping in everyday life is often illuminating as well. In that aspect of our lives that has occasionally involved academic administration, we have found that charts of who sits next to whom at faculty meetings provides us with clues about potential or real coalitions and alliances.

2. Some researchers do routinely leave a tape recording going during meetings and even hanging out. As long as the participants in research know they are being taped, a taped record can be a great aid to memory when writing fieldnotes, or even be transcribed verbatim. Bourgois (1995) had a tape recorder running much of the time.

3. Running observation is a technique for structured observation in which the observer takes running notes on all events as they unfold.

4. As we will discuss in chapter 10, we believe that it is unethical *not* to experience a period of supervised research before undertaking a completely independent project.

5. Marvin Harris went even further in criticizing those anthropologists with a post-modernist or reflexive bent. He said that the solution to the criticisms they raise " is not to abandon one's attempt to be scientific but to attempt to overcome subjective limitations by being more scientific. The phenomenological obscurantists would have us believe that no objectivity is better than a little objectivity. They blow out the candle and praise the dark" (1979, 327).