

### **3.2. Observation**

*He who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe,  
is as good as dead: his eyes are closed*

Albert Einstein

#### **Types of Observation**

Some researchers like to use observation as a supplementary method. Students usually need some kind of orientation of the habit to get a "feeling of the place" before they start thinking about how to establish contacts. Also, they prefer to spot potentially interesting topics and simply find out about the "background" of the interviews. For many researchers, however, observation is the main method of choice. Experiences from the field then provide the main body of material and can be further supplemented with what the participants say during interviews.

There are two main types of observation:

1. Participant observation, that takes place when a researcher becomes a participant in a community/organisation and conducts research from this perspective;
2. Non-participant observation, when the researcher remains an outsider and does not take part in the social situation under study.

Both types have their advantages and disadvantages – something that will be discussed later on in this book. Indeed, some researchers look for ways in which they might combine a non-participant and participant observation. The most widespread "hybrids" are direct observation and shadowing. In the following passages the types are ordered and described according to the logic resulting from the role of the researcher: from being outside (non-participant observation) to being inside (participant observation).

## Non-participant Observation

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sun set. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight. (Berger, 1991, p.7)

Non-participant observation is a conscious attempt to experience the here and now. The researcher remains separated from the field; his or her position is that of a complete outsider with no social role within the setting. The researcher is like a traveller, a stranger who looks at the world from some distance and collects impressions. A well-done observation of this sort should avoid categorisations and, in particular, any judgment of what is being observed. The researcher is oriented towards pure awareness and perception and strives to avoid interpretations of what she or he sees and hears. Naturally, we are all brought up in a culture and grow up as part of it. It is impossible to completely escape it because, as Wittgenstein said, cognition beyond the limits of language is impossible. The natural process of perception consists of an automatic typification of the world around us (Berger and Luckmann, 1966/1983). In everyday life we engage the following subsequent phases of perception → description → interpretation → evaluation. When we observe, it is a good idea to try to cut the latter two short and instead focus on the perception and description of reality. Evaluation in particular can be an obstacle to the learning of new things. There are people who

experience the world mainly through evaluation, however, in that they are unable to live through anything without judging it. Nothing new ever seems to happen to them – and indeed it does not, because before they are able to register it they have already labelled and evaluated it. Consider, for example, neighbours walking their dogs who spot a man that hasn't shaved for a while, dressed in trousers that are too big for him, wearing a jacket of grey-green hue and a frayed cap and carrying a plastic bag with visible fragments of multicoloured cloth. One of the neighbours, let us call him Stefan, says:

"See that guy? A homeless man?"

The other neighbour, Göran, replies:

"Yeah, one of them, an alcoholic for sure, it's no wonder the wife kicked him out! Types like that do not do anything, they just waste money on drinking and we are supposed to pay taxes so that they can blissfully continue until they drink themselves to death."

Neither Stefan nor Göran know the man carrying the plastic bag. They are both seeing him for the first time in their lives, but they react as though they have known him for ages. This is an example of typification that is applied by people in their everyday lives, not dwelling on every single experience, but immediately sorting them into set types that they have acquired through the socialisation process. Stefan and Göran "know" who the man with the plastic bag is, because it has been instilled into them in the process of upbringing. They have received information about this type of "homeless" person through the mass media, education, common knowledge, etc. Stefan typifies through simple interpretation and associates the image of a man with a plastic bag with the social category of "homeless". For Göran it is the evaluation phase that dominates the perception process. Such a social reception, one that is oriented towards interpretation and evaluation, allows for efficient reacting and diverts

attention from everyday activities and interactions. An adult person usually utilises attention for other activities, such as planning or thinking over what happened in the past. Typification enables such a shift of attention and, in this sense, makes life easier. But adulthood also means having a pool of ready-to-use types, which is why grown-ups are not surprised by anything any more; they "have heard and seen everything already", and there is nothing new under the sun. For the person with a complete set of types it is difficult to encounter the individual – because picking it out from the type is not part of the everyday perception process.

The person that engages in ethnographic research tries to stay aware all the time. It is particularly significant during non-participant observation, because the success of the research depends on the ability to step out of the common categories of typification that he or she adopted during the socialisation process. In other words, the researcher tries to rely on the first phase in the process of perception, i.e. description. Children do that all the time, although not in so many words as they usually use a plasticised non-verbal language to engage with the world. Perhaps that's why children are able to learn new things. They often leave the two latter phases of the perception process to the grown-ups by asking the questions: What is it? (they ask for interpretation), and Why? What for? (evaluation). During observation one can try to look at the world as if one were a child again, i.e. in a very intense and personal way. In ethnography, interpretation can be taken up after returning from the field, and evaluation is not always necessary at all.

Children are rarely bored when they explore the world. Children, ethnographers and mystics tend to see what is unique and concentrate on the moment. That makes the world much more interesting, but also uncertain and full of surprises. In the previously described scene with the neighbours, an ethnographer would try to take it all in and describe it in behavioural terms. What does the man look like? What does he do? What do the neighbours do and say? He or she does not speculate who they are and what they are like, but rather

focuses on what is there at that particular moment. Who knows? Perhaps the man with the bag is not homeless at all, but a British journalist visiting Warsaw for a short holiday. Our common types are usually correct (therefore they are effective), but they might also be fallacious. There are many good reasons why individuals may step beyond the confines of categories, which may constitute a chance for learning and for amazement. A person that is never astonished is unable to learn.

Harold Garfinkel is famous for assigning his students with seemingly easy homework that consists of non participation in everyday social situations (e.g. Garfinkel, 1967). For instance, when at home and eating breakfast with the family, students were to behave as if they were "visitors from another planet", in that they were not to take anything for granted or participate in social situations but observe them from a distance and question the meaning of everything they were expected to do and say.<sup>1</sup> Some students gained profound and interesting insights and impressions from these exercises, although they also found it very stressful because the ways in which their families reacted to the students' "alienated" approach was often negative and sometimes even aggressive, even when they were just keeping quiet and trying to remain passive. Non-participant observation may thus create problems where some sort of participation is expected on the part of the researcher. It is better to proclaim openly that we are going to concentrate on observing the field. The idea of pretending to be an alien visitor from outer space is thus to be recommended, as it may be helpful in refraining from the temptation to categorise. Keeping one's attention keenly focused is crucial to the success of the endeavour. The best way of assessing whether the observation is going well is to check whether it feels interesting. Even everyday places and situations become uncommonly interesting when observed in this way in that it feels as though the enchantment and wonder of childhood has been recaptured.

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<sup>1</sup> Such conduct has even earned the name of *garfinkeling*.

An obstacle to remaining fully focused may be the need to take notes on the spot. Such notes can prove to be useful, however. Some people may prefer to abstain from taking notes in the field and try to do it when they return home, recreating as much as possible from memory. But memories are imperfect, and very often typify our experiences *ex post*, against our best intentions. Some people, on the other hand, prefer to try to remain focused and attentive to the present moment and take notes (or record commentaries) simultaneously. This is a useful skill and can easily be developed through practice.

Non-participant observation may be an enjoyable experience, and I used to recommend it to students who were beginning to learn about ethnographic methods. When explaining the topic of non-participant observation to my students I usually use a metaphor, which makes it easier to grasp the very specific state of mind that should be characteristic for any anthropologist in the field. Non-participant observation is like looking at a stereogram. We take a picture and look at it. It is often quite boring, consisting of numerous rows of identical patterns like, for instance, little hearts. But once we are able to look at it in a certain way, and fans of stereograms know a lot of tricks that support the re-focus of sight, a new dimension starts to emerge. Something new, interesting and three-dimensional emerges from a seemingly boring picture and lends itself to closer examination. In non-participant observation the experience of the observer is similar: what is needed is the ability to change the way of looking and suddenly a new picture of the field emerges. Everyday scenes become new and interesting and may be looked at for as long as we remain truly focused. My students were often rather sceptical about whether this was possible, but when they tried they usually succeeded. Discovering new and interesting facets of an ostensibly "boring" reality can be a very positive experience. Sometimes the observations happen to be really informative and enlightening. Another reason why non-participant observation may be considered to be a good starting point for learning ethnography is the possibility of an almost immediate positive

result, thus encouraging further studies. Students usually observe popular, generally accessible places that are organised but not clearly separated, such as shopping malls, railway stations, concert halls, schools, buses, etc. These seemingly well-known places reveal their secrets to them and, as one of my older students put it, provide an opportunity to get away from the everyday and take a fresh look at the world and become young again.

I greatly enjoy non-participant observation and often use it in my work – sometimes just for fun. Together with a co-author I explored what we then called empty spaces in public buildings (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 1999), looking at the Palace of Culture in Warsaw as well as a government building and several university buildings. We walked together but barely talked, except to exchange short messages. We only talked about what we saw afterwards. We discovered a whole new world, as if underpinning the old and well-known one:

The social space one inhabits is a collection of aims and roads, a map of everyday reality. One's own everyday life world is always the most boring. Alien worlds that people visit once in a while (foreign countries, unfamiliar organizations, etc.) can be interesting and exotic, but nonetheless for most people they boil down to a tourist collection of aims and roads. Between everyday reality and boredom and tourism and exoticism there is an empty space, not belonging to anyone in particular. It is imperceptible to inhabitants and visitors alike, it lies beyond the sphere of interest of people who do not actively look for the unconventional in ordinary places. Emptiness remains, however, the integral part of every ordered space, the invisible conjunction between its different aspects. It is in these empty spaces that possibilities for change are hidden, beyond the rational designs for development and transformation. (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 1999, p. 47)

Another interesting field to study in this way, and that may reveal a lot about the contemporary culture of the country and place we live in, is the shopping mall or supermarket. For some people it may be quite difficult to switch from the role of a participant (customer) to that of an observer. Among other things non-participation means refraining from shopping, because this turns the observer into a participant and absorbs the attention that is needed for observation. It might be a good idea to toss a can of ketchup into your basket at the very beginning, instead of just walking around empty-handed and staring, as two of my students learned. A security guard approached them and asked them in not too polite terms to leave the premises, calling them "spies". They tried to protest and claimed that they were engaged in scientific observation, but this did not improve their situation. Other students who had more luck (and something in their baskets) reported many interesting findings. "They looked hypnotised!" one of them said, which triggered a flood of expeditions to the supermarkets on the part of their peers; not for the sake of any particular assignment but out of sheer curiosity. Apart from people, students were also watching the physical space, its characteristic constructions, shelves and commodities, the colours of packages and colour impressions as a whole. Ceilings proved to be extremely interesting, as they were not intended for the eyes of the "common participant" but were often different from the rest of the shop. A glance at the ceiling can constitute a neat "trick" in acquiring an "ethnographic gaze", instead of slipping into the role of a customer – like the tricks used by stereogram fans and adopted in order to see the third dimension.

There are not many examples of research publications based exclusively or mainly on non-participant observation. Perhaps the most well-known are the reflections on space by Michel de Certeau (1974/1988), based on the author's walks through the city: admiration of the already non-existent World Trade Center, a railway trip that combines being trapped in the motionlessness with observing through the window how static objects are moving. The author

ponders about contemporary everyday life. What is space? How do we experience space? What is the role played by the language in this process? De Certeau's book is not ethnography in the strict sense of the word, but rather the reflection by an anthropologically-minded thinker, for whom everyday reality constitutes the possibility of contemplating common things (such as coffee and sandwiches served on the train) and great and abstract subjects (like time and space).

Richard Rotterburg (2000) wrote an account of his observations in a bar located in the borderland between Poland and Germany. The bar is depicted as the place situated between realities, cultures and systems of meanings, where it is difficult to make sense of who the actors are, what they are doing and why. The types and labels that appear turn out to be all wrong, they shift and transform into each other: people who seemed to be students then act as if they were prostitutes or transform into shy schoolgirls from the countryside; time passes and categories blur to become increasingly fluid and vague. Even the temporal typification is unclear. The observer from Western Germany cannot work out if it is 1997 or 1987, or perhaps even 1977. Also, the location of the bar on the map of Europe is not evident from the appearance of the people and the interior.

Another example of ethnographic account based mainly on non-participation is Roch Sulima's book, *Anthropology of Everyday Life* (2000). The author describes common places and scenes, such as recreational allotments in Warsaw, people drinking alcohol in the courtyard, or scenes from a supermarket. Through these pictures Sulima describes the Polish transformation and modernity's everyday forms. The human world is portrayed as changeable and fluid, but at the same time as stable and recognisable. Existing landscapes melt into new themes and representations.

## Direct Observation

Direct observation provides the researcher with the possibility of keeping a distance and, at the same time, getting closer to the field. The researcher is no "alien from outer space", but rather a "guest" from outside the field. Description is still of key importance, but with direct observation the social actors themselves can help to provide the interpretations. The ethnographer can ask questions and inquire into the reasons why people act as they do and their opinions about it. While the researcher does not assume a social role from within the setting, it is not unusual that he or she explains to the actors in the field who they are and what they want to do. The ethnographer does not need to be present every day or during the entire working day. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why so many students of organisations choose this method.

Usually the researcher is able to take notes on the spot, but sometimes this may be difficult due to the reactions of the "natives". Some of my students complained that while they were observing what the actors were doing, the actors in the field were just as intense in their observations of them. This is almost like "being on stage", but the spotlights are both on the actors and on the audience. This may be experienced as exhausting in the long run. However, it can be really interesting to be able to learn new things and at the same time learn about the significance to the actors. Many of my students found this method both useful and practical.

I use direct observation quite often, for example, in my recent study of non-governmental organisations. In fact I spent so much time in one of the organisations (Lambda Warszawa, a Polish LGBT organisation) that one of the participants joked that I had obviously moved into their offices. People became so used to my presence that they didn't seem to be distracted by me sitting there with them, but always answered my questions and were very kind and generous in providing me with all sorts of information. During meetings and sessions I naturally kept quiet, but afterwards I would ask hundreds of questions. Nobody

seemed to mind very much; one person even said that this was a great opportunity for him to verbalise all sorts of things that he could use in his future work.

Two students once conducted a direct observation at the central railway station in Warsaw in order to examine what this place looked like "from close range" – a place that has since become something of a tradition in my organisational ethnography courses. Usually students conducted non-participant observation, although this time the two male students visited the HR department where they conducted a direct observation and complemented the study with interviews. One of the HR employees then invited them to spend a day in the ticket office at the station, and one of the cashiers agreed to them sitting and observing while she worked. The students were able to ask questions when the cashier was not busy with clients, although most of the time they just watched because there were constant queues in front of the counter. The students learned what a typical workday of a cashier at the Warsaw Central Station looked like and what people buying tickets look like "from the other side". They realised that a cashier's work is actually quite solitary, because their contact with people is rather superficial and occasional and that, as it is almost impossible to establish any lasting connections with colleagues, the cashier is rather apt to act on his or her own initiative. They also realised how important it was to be friendly and well mannered when buying tickets. For the client it is just a relatively brief interaction, but the cashier's entire working day is made up of such interactions.

Gideon Kunda's *Engineering Culture* (1992) is based on the direct observation of a company, when Kunda observed middle-level management in a modern American corporation for six months. He also conducted interviews and studied internal and external company-related documents. The whole research process took a year. Kunda studied how and why a company, called Tech in the book, tried to control and promote its "corporate culture", and how this influenced the everyday work and identity of the employees. For Kunda the

most interesting problem was how the company tried to instil normative control over the hearts of its employees and how people dealt with this. As it turned out, the most common method for facing the control of hearts was irony - sometimes subtle and not easy to grasp by the outsider, and sometimes more blatant and obvious. Thanks to irony, engineers, specialists and "ordinary" workers could not only maintain a feeling of dignity, but could also have fun at work, thus defying the intentions of those who "manage their culture".

Another piece of research based mainly on direct observation is the study of the notion of quality in the Swedish health service system conducted by Gudbjörg Erlingsdóttir (1999). The author observed three clinics in one of the hospitals in the Southern part of Sweden. She visited several wards in each clinic at least three days a week and also attended meetings on the topic. The researcher took regular notes as discreetly as she could so as not to interfere with the work that was going on around her or to distort the natural functioning of the field. The researcher was interested in processes and actions rather than the people's specific roles (she adopted the technique of shadowing when she wanted to find out more about these roles). Erlingsdóttir writes about the advantages of direct observation in the following way:

I recognised my understanding of the health service environment as a strength in the conducted direct observation in that thanks to that I was a bit more comfortable with gaining some kind of orientation in rooms, "mingling with the environment" and understanding communication and actions that were taking place, than would have been the case using any other method. The ability to "mingle into the ambience" might also have contributed to the fact that I was never treated suspiciously, either by staff members or the patients. (Erlingsdóttir, 1999, p. 46).

The result of Erlingsdóttir's fieldwork illustrates how the idea of quality control is translated into the practice of the Swedish health service, i.e. how the increasingly popular

institutions of audit, accreditation, etc., are being implemented and applied in the everyday work of the health service.

The following story, told by an experienced researcher, demonstrates how the researcher who studies culture directly might approach the understanding of the problems of this culture through their own experience.

### **The Shared Experience (by Iiris Aaltio-Marjosola)**

When I started negotiations with the management in the company in which I wanted to conduct the direct observation for my dissertation research I had an appointment with the director of R&D, Mr. Kettunen, scheduled at 9 a.m. I was very concerned not to be late: I was thinking that would not be the best start of our cooperation: so I arrived in his office at 5 minutes to 9 a.m. We were talking for a while, and then we went to meet the CEO, Mr. Rask. As it turned out, his office was located in another building, and it took some time to get there, because one needed to walk through a courtyard to reach the end of the office block. It was probably about 9:04 a.m. when we arrived. Mr. Rask was awaiting us, we exchanged greetings, but he appeared to be a bit restless. He tellingly looked at his watch and said "OK, we have some time to talk". Clearly, that was a comment aimed at expressing his opinion that we were late, although we should not have been. Even if it was directed more to Mr. Kettunen than to me I was worried as I thought the whole project would fall into ruin because of us being late. Luckily no such thing happened and I started the ethnographic project in this company.

Later on, I interpreted my experience: why being on time was so important. I noticed that the company was striving to develop a more project-oriented culture than it used to be before. Until then, it had been an entrepreneurial culture, with great spontaneity,

without rigorous schedules, etc. However, at that time it was going through some serious problems and the management concluded that it was a high time to introduce new routines. The managers were functioning as examples of these, thus punctuality became a managerial virtue. The gesture of looking at the watch did not mean that Mr. Rask did not have time for us because of us being late, but it was rather to tell Mr. Kettunen: You have broken the implicit rule, punctuality constitutes the value we share, and you are late. That experience of mine, even if accidental, turned my attention towards the main values of the enterprise and the changes that were taking place there. Time is a shared experience, every organization has its own understanding of time that it applies basing on the experience from the past. The time relation of the culture's participants varies depending on organization: that is what the event has taught me.

## **Shadowing**

Shadowing is the constant accompaniment of a person as they perform their organisational role, i.e. following them everywhere and observing what they do without the researcher taking on an internal organisational role. The term shadowing also suggests following and watching someone, as a detective or spy. But "shadowing" in the literal sense of "being one's shadow" seems to fit the intention and nature of this book much better, as the watching and spying have rather negative connotations. The researcher attempts to stay by observed person's side but at the same time minimises his or her presence in the studied situation. It is advisable not to interrupt, except for asking questions about what they do. The worst shadower I ever heard about was a person who dominated the social actor he was observing, attracted the attention of her clients and, consequently, failed to learn much about the work of this person (he had

quite a different opinion on this matter, though, in that he regarded the method as quite worthless and thus failed to collect the material required).

At first the presence of the researcher is felt to be alien and awkward, but after some time it often happens that the shadowers almost become the invisible shadows of the person they are studying. One of my students managed to mingle into the background to the point that when the person she observed had visitors, they failed to greet her or give her eye-contact. She wasn't even offered coffee together with the others. She said she felt like a piece of furniture rather than a human being.

There are numerous studies based mainly or in part on shadowing. One of them is the already-mentioned book by Gudbjörg Erlingsdóttir (1999). The direct observation that was adopted as a method by the researcher was also supplemented by the shadowing of several people, such as nurses, whose organisational roles were particularly interesting from the viewpoint of the subject of the research project. When drinking coffee together with the "natives", Erlingsdóttir asked if anyone would be willing to accept her as a "shadow" on the following day. Every day she observed a different person, focusing not on them but rather on the types of organisational roles (positions and the work places). It is a method that allows something of an insider's view but that nevertheless maintains the outsider's position and clarity of perspective.

Another interesting research piece based substantially on shadowing is the study of the notion and practice of responsibility in the Swedish reality of organising (Johansson, 1998). Ulla Johansson accompanied selected housing office employees in their everyday work in an attempt to comprehend how they understand their responsibility and how they realised it in practice. Ulla Johansson maintains that she got to understand what such job was about much better than if she had asked them typical questions during an interview. Not everything they were doing could be translated into verbal language, particularly as a large part of their

organisational reality is concerned with physical contact and thus expressed by body language rather than verbal formulations. Research based exclusively on interviews, especially in the case of some of the professional roles that Johansson was studying, runs the risk of reductionism in that it omits the entire sphere of extra-verbal organisational practice. In addition, the shadowing of participants helped the author to develop a respect for the studied people and their work. Responsibility turned out to have an impact on the construction of the employees' identity. However, this responsibility was not practically constructed in the top-down vein as traditional organisational theory would imply, but contextually, by responding to the concrete event in the organisational every-day reality.

Shadowing is useful because it helps to develop respect in a natural way. Both Gudbjörg Erlingsdóttir and Ulla Johansson emphasise that shadowing made it much easier for them to interpret and comprehend the collected data and to develop an empathy for the people they were studying. These benefits, together with the distance resulting from the role of the passive researcher, produce a unique combination of participant and non-participant observation: the researcher is both on the outside (role of the researcher) and on the inside (empathising with the observed person) at the same time.

Attila Bruni and Silvia Gherardi (2001) applied the method of shadowing when studying the work of a consultant. They aimed at understanding the way in which the gender-related professional identity of the consultant was constructed: which actions make her a woman and a professional in her field. A researcher accompanied her throughout all the phases of the consulting project. For ten weeks - three days a week - the researcher was present in all her professional situations, whether working in the office or visiting her clients. The consultant, called Omega in the research accounts, was also interviewed by the researchers. As her "shadow" the ethnographer noted down impressions in his notebook. The notes, together with the record of the interview, form the basis for conclusions about the

construction of gender in the work of a consultant. Despite the person being studied claiming the lack of influence of gender on her work, the study shows how professionalism is associated with the masculine, and how this has an impact on Omega's construction of professional identity.

The following ethnographical story tells us about the dilemmas concerning identification, loyalty and the feeling of honesty towards the field that the researcher may encounter in the research using the method of "shadowing".

### **What Does it Mean to be Single? (by Attila Bruni)**

I was doing ethnographic research in the editorial offices of a gay newspaper, a setting peopled entirely by homosexual men<sup>2</sup>.

One day the person I was 'shadowing' said to me: "have you got a boyfriend or are you single?" Seeing that I'm a male I realized that he thought I was homosexual. He was wrong, but the question caught me unawares, and I began to think about how being considered an 'insider' might help me access information about the group.

Everyone knew that I was there to do ethnographic research, and I assessed the possibility of 'sharing' the reality in which I found myself while not belonging to it.

As it happened I had no partner at the time, and so I simply answered that I was "single". The conversation stopped there, for the time being. I knew that he thought I was gay, but I couldn't understand why. I found this odd but not particularly embarrassing. What I did find embarrassing was the fact that I had done nothing to prevent him from thinking I was gay (but nor had I done anything to make him think otherwise), and this is the name of 'research' and 'managing to become part of the reality observed'. Yet it seems strange that I should be able to 'confuse' a homosexual.

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<sup>2</sup> The results of this study were published in Attila in Gherardi (2001b).

In a sense it was a problem of culture, and here a brief aside on my 'image' is required. I have long hair (tied back), a goatee, and earring (just one), I wear cardigans and slacks, and I am what is usually called 'soft-spoken'. It was not the first time that someone has thought I was gay, but it has usually been heterosexuals who do so. This is because (I presume) my 'image' corresponds to the stereotype that Western heterosexual culture has produced of homosexuals. And this is why a homosexual who knows his 'culture' (and who does not have long hair, an earring or a goatee, and is decidedly more 'in-your-face' than I am) often takes me the wrong way. Moreover, I have homosexual friends, both gay and lesbian, and none of them has ever mistaken my heterosexuality. Which I therefore presume is reasonably obvious.

In the days that followed, because I was in close contact with the person for entire workdays, I found myself discussing just about everything with him: politics, films, travel, hobbies, and so on. We obviously didn't think in the same way, but there emerged a world which both of us to some extent shared, at least at the level of keywords.

On my last day, during the final interview, we began to talk about the situation of the gay community in Italy and how nice it would be if things were otherwise. I wanted him to tell me something about the relations between male, female and homosexuality. If there is a (cultural) construction of male and female, I was interested in whether and how homosexuality is likewise constructed. I realized that this meant asking a declaredly homosexual person about prejudices against homosexuals, and I also realized that this was not a particularly 'polite' thing to do. In fact I did not know how to ask him. But I then remembered that he thought I was homosexual as well, and at a certain point asked: "But, for example, the other day why did you ask me so confidently if I had a boyfriend?"

"Why?"

"Well, I'm usually asked if I have a girlfriend..."

"Yes, but you can see!"

"You can see what?"

"That you're homosexual"

"And how can you see?"

"Well, a straight would have settled the gender question simply by doing research on women. And then a straight would never have been interested in the homosexuality issue in particular ... and he would never have managed to get so far into the editorial offices as you have done..." And so on, but with the oddity that the more the conversation continued, the more his remarks about heterosexuals became insults. I listened, merely smiling and nodding from time to time. And then I began to feel uneasy; not because I am heterosexual and he was badmouthing heterosexuals, but because *he did not know it*.

So I had spent 8 hours a day for five days with this person. We had eaten together, chatted, and he had been as helpful as possible ... and in the end I was duping him. And I also realized that if he hadn't taken me for a homosexual he would never have told me what he was now saying, and that my justification for leading him on was the 'valuable information' that I was obtaining. Which was pretty 'weak' justification in terms of relations with another person.

"... but you're gay, aren't you?" This was the final phrase in his explanation of why he thought I was gay. As a question it left no room for evasion; the answer could only be yes or no. I was seriously embarrassed, more than anything else because saying 'yes' would have been an outright lie, while saying 'no' would reveal that I had been dishonest with him.

"No"

"Ah, how strange, I could have sworn... "

"Yes, I know ... yet ... no, I'm not homosexual"

"So ... have you got a girlfriend?"

"No, I really am single". It is not a pleasant sensation to face someone to whom you have just admitted that although you haven't been lying, neither have you been telling the truth. Of course, I could have explained the value of being considered an 'insider' for my participant observation. But this didn't seem a good excuse from a human point of view. Indeed, it seemed shabby. The problem is that when he had asked me (three days previously) about my sentimental situation, and I had decided 'not to tell a lie' (but not in the sense that I told the truth), I never imagined that I would again find myself in a similar situation. I can guarantee that there was nothing premeditated in my behaviour. I did not know what was going to happen some days later, nor did I know whether I would be able to handle the interviews without committing 'heterosexual' gaffes. But I think I managed it.

MARGINAL NOTE. How did it work out? Well, fortunately. After the embarrassment of the first 15 seconds, I continued talking as if nothing strange had happened (did something strange happen?) and my 'research subject' (a term which, after what had just happened, seemed to me no better than any other 'politically correct' expression) was more surprised at his error than at my gaffe. Which raises the question of whether one should pay more attention to errors or to gaffes in ethnographic research?

## Participant Observation

Participant observation can be of great value because social actors are sometimes not willing to reveal much to an outsider. An insider enjoys access to lots of interesting and perhaps sensitive information, as well as acquiring an understanding of why certain things are done in a particular way – something that can often be hard to grasp for a person "from the outside". Besides, one may learn through experience, which is an intensive and very special form of learning. In terms of an anthropological understanding it may be particularly valuable to acquire tacit knowledge (or practical knowledge, cumulated experience; Polanyi, 1958/1974). This kind of knowledge represents knowledge in action and, in contrast to theoretical knowledge is knowledge related to knowing-how, which is for instance characteristic to the professional who knows how to get work done but does not necessarily think about the rules that govern it. The role of a manager is often described in this way, as are many other organisational roles that are of interest to organisational researchers. An expert or manager usually acts effectively without formulating any theory about their work. Theories (i.e. knowing the conventions, identifying the rules, etc.) may be useful as an aid to organisational or professional roles, but become obsolete at the very moment the person starts to perform that role in practice. Michael Polanyi claimed that an expert with certain skills gains an understanding (knowledge) that corresponds to these skills, and which can be difficult to express (Polanyi 1958/1974). This difficulty is easy to imagine when one tries to describe in words how to ski (picturing a listener sitting next to us who does not have a clue about skiing). The only reasonable advice appears to be the saying of Ingmar Stenmark: "You just ski"<sup>3</sup>. The only really effective way to learn what reality and work look like from the perspective of tacit knowledge may be through participant observation.

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<sup>3</sup> *De ä bara åk* in Swedish

The engagement of the participating researcher in a social situation may constitute a problem. The researcher participates in the field (acculturation) and thereby runs the risk of losing an anthropological frame of mind, starting to take the surrounding reality for granted and failing to problematise. A famous Chinese proverb put this state into perspective: "the fish is the last to realise that water exists" and alludes to it being better not to study one's own culture, in this case the culture the researcher participates in.

I share this conviction, as I have already explained in Section 1.3. Participant observation should then be a clear research endeavour, which means that the researcher only participates in order to conduct his or her studies, and that participation is over once the research is complete. At the same time, and throughout all the research, the researcher should be predominantly active in problematising the studied reality. Only one of my students has conducted a prolonged participant observation. He worked for an NGO for over a year, helping a child from an underprivileged family to improve his grades in school. It was an interesting study, yet very time consuming – which is why most of my students refrain from adopting this method.

One of the most famous examples of participant observation is the book *Manufacturing Consent* (1979/1982) by Michael Burawoy. The author adopted the role of machine operator in a large American corporation for a period of nine months. Burawoy wondered why people work as well and as effectively as they do, and observed that they meet the quota thanks to the game that is played to avoid boredom and monotony at work. The author identified and described an array of other games played by workers, noting that such games are not played in opposition to the interests of the management. While managers do not often take part in the actual games, they do legitimise and consent to their rules. Burawoy's book is a study of consent that went beyond the dominating discourse at the time of writing, according to which workers were to act in defiance of management (and that the most natural

attitude of management is not to trust, or, depending on the research perspective adopted, that the relationships between management and workers are based on an unquestioned class conflict).

Another well known book is *Street Corner Society* by William Foote Whyte (1943/1993). The author, first of all making direct observations and later observing as a participant, studied a poor Italian district in an American city, which he called Cornerville. He was interested in learning about the district's formal and informal organisations and the rules and values of the people living there. He started his research in 1936 and continued for 4 years. He moved to the district and rented a room from an Italian family, which was a far cry from the standards he had been used to at Harvard. However, it made lot of doors literally and symbolically open for him. He lived there for three years, including several short breaks (even after getting married he continued to live there with his wife), meeting with people, listening to their stories and actively participating in their lives. He learned Italian in order to blend in and communicate easily. However, it was only when he actively proved that he accepted the norms of this society - by participating in various activities and becoming secretary of a local organisation – that he gained total acceptance and won the true trust of the field, which meant that he was able to gain access to material that had previously been inaccessible to him. He first of all focused his observations on human interactions and how people organised themselves. These observations significantly broadened the existing knowledge about spontaneous processes of organising from the perspective of individual people: their motives, dreams, convictions, etc. Whyte also befriended the people he researched, especially his main field contact, known in the book as Doc – something that continued after the study was finished. His work is to be regarded as an example of an engaged ethnography (nowadays represented, for example, by Behar, 1993), which is where the distanced attitude of a

researcher is shaken or even abandoned in the practice of conscious empathy and a feeling of solidarity.<sup>4</sup>

Robin Leidner (1993) worked in two places, supplementing the material gleaned from participant observations with interviews. The entire research process took more than two years. Her main research topic was how work becomes a routine. She was interested in how people deal with highly repetitive work environments: whether it is easy or hard to work, how people physically and psychologically endure the constant attempts to standardise their actions, appearance and even emotions. The routine of work has far-reaching social consequences that are related to ways of understanding individuality and responsibility, and there is a constant conflict between autonomy and the dominant corporate culture.

Krzysztof Konecki, a Polish author applying the method of participant observation in organisational research, was employed as a worker in three Japanese enterprises (1992b). He worked in one of them for a month, and in the other two conducted covert participant observation for about a month. In his book, *In the Japanese Factory*, he describes phenomena and problems that caught his attention during the research, namely, the attitude to work, the notion of work and the symbol of a Japanese company. As a result of not having revealed that he was a researcher he was "drawn into" social settings quite rapidly and expected to work just like the others – even though, of course, being a foreigner he remained an outsider anyway. Speaking personally, I prefer to reveal who I am in the field. I would not feel comfortable pretending to be something I am not and would feel as if the falseness of my identity was clear to everyone around me. I would also be afraid of blending into the studied reality in an attempt to convincingly construct the identity of a participant. However, covert observation is a good method for those who can deal with it and do not feel insecure with their identity being "camouflaged". For example, Krzysztof Konecki has repeatedly carried

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<sup>4</sup> William Fote Whyte proposed a methodology called *Action Research*, where the researcher simultaneously studies and helps a community, e.g. provides knowledge support, helps to learn how to solve social problems, etc (see Whyte, 1991).

out interesting studies using this method, and one of my students who engaged in participant observation did it in a partly covert mode – not everyone in the NGO he studied knew he was doing research there. It is also a good method to use if someone is wanting to learn about the everyday life of a gang as it enables them to join it and befriend its members (like Hunter Thompson).

A well-known example of research based on covert participation is the book *Men Who Manage* by Melville Dalton (1959), dedicated to the moral dilemmas of top-rank managers. This work became the subject of much discussion, from a methodological as well as a moral perspective, but to many readers it is a precious source of knowledge that is otherwise difficult or even impossible to obtain. The author accepted managerial positions in two companies and took notes and talked to the employees. Some of his co-workers were aware of his research, but most people were not. These trusted people constituted the main source of research material for Dalton. In two other organisations he relied exclusively on the trusted informants and did not perform any organisational roles himself. He also met managers in a popular club, where he was basically still a "camouflaged" researcher to most of them. Thanks to such an approach, Dalton managed to collect unique data, relating, for example, to the affiliation of top-level managers with Masonic lodges. The key contribution of Dalton is the description of conformism in managerial work, and the description of conflict as a typical, or even characteristic phenomenon in the work of managers. In spite of the fact that Dalton's research dates back to almost half a century, in many respects it still reads as timely and *au courant*. A contemporary study similar to the one by Dalton was undertaken by Tony Watson (1994/1997). He worked alongside managers in a company he calls ZTC Ryland in an attempt to make sense of what management was and meant to those who made their living as managers. The researcher presents organisational practices critically, although not as an outside reviewer but rather as the view emerging from the field itself. The book takes up

several important aspects of contemporary management and organisation, such as the identity of the manager, organisational strategy, culture and everyday theorising by practitioners. The ethnography is written as the story of a quest, or, as the title indicates – an investigation of management. It takes the reader on a journey through a company as though they are accompanying the researcher and the managers being studied and can listen to their dialogues. The company is trying to survive in a changing environment and the managers are very much aware of the fashionable responses to these changes, such as empowerment and culture management. They try to make sense of the challenges, as well as of their own role in responding to them. Storytelling and humour play a central role in managers' style of life and work – and the way in which they are narrated in the book provides a powerful means of inspiration and understanding.

In the following passage, Michael Burawoy describes his experience of participant observation.

### **Painting Socialism (by Michael Burawoy)**

It was the freezing Hungarian Winter of 1985. My dream had been realised, I had entered the heartland of the socialist working class. I had a job as a furnaceman at the basic oxygen converter of the enormous Lenin Steel Works that dominated Miskolc, Hungary's industrial second city. After only a few weeks with the October Revolution Socialist Brigade, panic overtook the management, as it faced the impending visit of the Prime Minister. There was much commotion, new overalls, ubiquitous repair work, a general sweeping, the melting of ice with gas burners, the army had come to shovel snow, and there was extensive painting. The absurdity of cleaning a steel mill escaped no one.

And then there was a communist shift. In aid of charity, such as support for children's hospital or the National Theatre, we work an extra shift. It's a socialist form of taxation. We were assigned to paint in yellow and green the slag drawer, a huge machine that skims off slag from the pig iron as its passes on the way to the converter. There were not enough paint brushes to go round. I could only find a black one. What could I paint black? What better than the most treasured of the furnaceman's tools -- his shovel? I had hardly begun this critical task when Stegermajer came storming over, with his hand behind his back and his hard hat bobbing, his head bowed for combat. "What the hell are you doing?" "Painting the shovels black," I replied as innocently as I could. But he was not amused so I added, "Haven't you got any more brushes so I can help the others?" No there weren't any others. "So I can't help build socialism?" I continued, trying to lighten the proceedings but nonetheless somewhat riskily. My mates cracked up, amused at the thought of their "yogurt furnaceman" building socialism. They referred to me as their "yogurt furnaceman" ["kefir olvasztár"] because I refused to indulge in their meals of pork fat and preferred instead to drink cartons of "kefir" -- cat food as they called it. Of course, they were also jokingly referring to my physical weakness and ineptitude. They called me a "50%" furnaceman. Even Stegermajer caved in when Józsi interceded, "Misi, Misi you don't understand anything. You are not "building• socialism you are "painting" socialism. And "black" at that.

The "painting" continued on Monday when we hauled out the always ascending graphs demonstrating the superiority of the converter over the old Siemen's Martin furnaces. Party slogans and directives for the forthcoming party congress as well as photographs of earlier visits by dignitaries were displayed at resting points on Tuesday's scenic tour. At noon on Monday, Stegermajer came over to me with an

embarrassed look, "You know the Prime Minister is coming tomorrow. "I nodded and smiled. "Well, why don't you take a holiday?" They surely didn't want their yogurt furnaceman upsetting the visit.

This was the metaphor through which I came to understand socialism, a ritualised "painting over" of the inequalities, inefficiencies and injustices that state socialism systematically produced. Compulsory painting drew attention to the gap between promise and reality, generating dissent rather than consent.<sup>5</sup> Only after the fact do ethnographers appreciate the deeper meanings of their experiences in the field.

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<sup>5</sup> This hints at the title of Michael Burawoy's book *Manufacturing Consent* (1979/1982). The book tells the story of how workers in a Western company endure the monotonous factory work. In this story the author points to the basic difference in his experiences of working in the socialist and the capitalist factory [M.K.].