

“Illumination”: Participant Observation in Critical Ethnography
Allison Farrell
Dr. Jeanne Marie Stumpf

ABSTRACT

This paper considers participant observation methodology involved in anthropology's quest to understand and describe the 'other'. My experience as an accidental tourist and my perception of the music festival subculture is used to explore quandaries of representation in a form that will demonstrate the nature of the culture being studied. Analyses of past and modern day fieldwork elucidate critical ethnography as an ever-changing process. Explored are the intricacies of distancing, grounding and multivocality in developing a holistic perspective. Evoking continuity as a guide inspires greater awareness and reaffirms the outcomes.

"Illumination": Participant Observation in Critical Ethnography

"Culture is not something given but rather something to be gradually and gropingly discovered" (Edward Sapir 1934) describes my experience in attempting to uncover the workings of the music festival subculture. Immersing myself in a subculture in which I had no prior knowledge provided a task of interpreting the mystery and wonder happening around me. Naivete sent my mind spiraling. I felt like a kid in a candy store, Alice in Wonderland, or Charlie in the chocolate factory. My experience, termed "accidental tourism" by Jeanne Stumpf-Carome, led me to uncover bits of the inner and outer-workings of the music festival "scene". The journey eventually led to my passion in anthropology and has influenced my view of participant observation methodology.

Working six years in various positions within the context of a "music festival," expanded my mind to encompass various perspectives and sculpted an objective scope, while also forming a connection and sense of belonging-- both important factors when entering a culture to study. Not having prior experience in the music festival scene before working there

created an interesting dichotomy for me. On one hand I was at the beck of a new chapter of my life just waiting to be explored. On the other hand, I also had the responsibility of doing my job to attend to. My experience shaped a fragment of understanding of the inner and outer-workings of the subculture. Within the walls of the subculture lies a place where life is expressed freely, yet also constrained by a set of ideals—sharing, caring and illuminating the human experience. This context, along with my personal experience of working within the constructs of this scene, has offered me a dynamic perspective built by a freedom to explore.

My emotion flows through this paper. It was not until this present moment, in which I am writing this paper, that my yearning to share a deeper personal meaning has been diminished by the task of editing the experiential. My kaleidoscopic experience is collapsing with the impact of a black hole. The difficulty of an anthropologist's pursuit is implied in the Introduction to Critical Ethnography, saying that "...representing Others is always going to be a complicated and contentious undertaking". I can conceive of the feeling a true anthropologist must face in conjuring a representative creation that reflects upon a group of others. Embodying this feeling, I imagine three concepts that seem to apply to this task of negotiating quandaries of representation within ethnography. Distancing, grounding and multivocality-- modes of participant observation-- are proposed as important perspectives to have while embracing participant observation methods.

It seems to me it is quite difficult to pinpoint expression of experience and turn it into an objective ethnography that allows for a understanding of how it might feel to be a part of that culture. Even viewing the park in and from so many perspectives can never allow me to

present a holistic representation, for it is only but my experience and thoughts attributing to my interpretation of this subculture. I can relate my personal struggles to integrate myself into music festival culture as similar to Powdermaker's (1966) experience. Her first attempt at participant observation offered challenges similar to mine. Powdermaker entered fieldwork experience in Lesu without much prior knowledge of the people she would be studying due to her destination changing last minute.

Powdermaker (1966) comments on Malinowski's holistic frame of reference, expressing that all description and analysis includes interrelated elements; "separate categories, but parts of the whole" (p. 38). She also shares a tip offered from Malinkowski before the start of her fieldwork. He mentioned that in the beginning she should write everything down because it is impossible to know what is significant or not. I could image that she took it as a very valuable piece of advice and I could imagine it helped many budding anthropologists since. Stumpf-Carome (1976) notes the demands of anthropology in expressing "...not the specific outcome of a single event, but rather the result of the complex inter-relations of events". She finds value within the anthropologist that can bring together many disciplines in a holistic approach.

Even if I was able to share with you the many perspectives I have gained, the sum of its parts could never add up to capture the experience itself. Attempting to translate the fractal-like expressions happening through the music festival scene deems virtually impossible. In order to cover the breadth of experience during my six years working there, I would have to continue to detail the rabbit hole of experience existing within the music festival community.

Stephen Tyler (1984) expresses, "Post-modern ethnography attempts to recreate textually this spiral of poetic and ritual performance" (p.126). Tyler's explication matches my emotion, for it is impossible to describe using language, a coherent representation encompassing the inner-workings of the music festival subculture. Keesing (1985) also raises the point, "A misleading translation may create not only nonexistent entities, but spurious analytically problems, as well" (p. 204). The use of language is a common issue that tends to be overlooked within anthropology. Language can interfere with the process. Whether it is "culturally specific" language of the other culture you are interpreting, or the language used in the interpretation itself, the use can affect the representation of the culture, carefully inscribed in an ethnography. James Clifford (1985) claims ethnography is "inescapably allegorical" in both content and form (p. 99). In other words, what is said about culture and what is implied by it's mode of textualization provides a "morally charged" discourse. Previous controversies within anthropology illustrate this dilemma. Take for example, the Margaret Mead and Derek Freeman controversy. Freeman was not happy with Mead's representation of the Samoan culture, and set out against her to destroy her fame.

Powdermaker (1966) stresses a continuing relation between personal feelings (sensory, aesthetic, emotional) and intellectual perception-- "How the anthropologist feels as well as what he does, since he is a part of the situation studied" (p.14). The separation existing in the fact that I was not a festival goer there purely for the entertainment created a feeling of detachment, or distance, from the regular crowd of festival goers. It set off my journey, with a perspective that an ethnographer should hold during participant observation in the culture

they are studying. Powdermaker argues “Expressing that the heart of participant observation is method is involvement and detachment” (p. 9). The relative positions I held from the start of my experience, and acting as an observer while participating in the action, allows me to express importance of distancing from this vantage point in the eyes of an ethnographer. It is also comforting to know that Powdermaker could relate.

An initial obstacle when entering any new scene is being accepted by the group you are studying. A deeper way to look at this is through grounding, or establishment within the culture. Johnson, Avenarius and Weatherford (2006) consider choosing a social role, and state “the potential ethnographer should be aware of how these factors will influence the kinds and diversity of data collection respective to every position”, saying, “The ethnographer's status as an outsider severely limits the information and the success or failure of their project relies on your integration within the community”. Working so many positions within the context of the musical festival, helped me to be accepted as having a “place” there. Without that acceptance, I would have been lost.

Highlighting the importance of multivocality involved in interpretation and presentation of cultures, as cited from a comment by J. G. Oosten in Keesing (1987), states, “The notion that cultural knowledge is controlled by one particular group in a society is altogether misleading.” Further acknowledging the importance of multivocality, George E. Marcus (1986) expresses a contemporary issues when writing ethnography. Within a historical context, observed cultural worlds are embedded in larger, more impersonal systems. I am not sure if I would understand the depths of this statement before spending a

few years at the park, observing the patterns of expression. As discussed and highlighted by Crapanzo (p.51) is “ethnography is historically determined by the moment of the ethnographer's encounter with whomever he is studying”. It serves to justify the difficulty in presentation of complex system.

According to Keesing, “Cultures, then, must be *situated*, placed in a context--- historically, politically, economically” (Interpretive Quest). These are various issues that come up during translation of participant observation material into a written ethnography.

Keesing (1987) illustrates this concept through comparison to an onion. He says that in order to understand the outermost layers, a person must accept that the layers of meaning that lie beneath are “...accessible only to men who pass through the progressive stages of cult initiation; at each stage new layers of symbolism are revealed. Only a few men in each generation understand the deepest layers of meaning. Sapir (1934) stated. “...that we are justified in speaking of the growth of culture at all, it must be in the spirit, not of a composite history made up of private histories of particular patters, but in the spirit of development of a personality”.

Another obstacle faced by the ethnograher, is that symbols within the culture may be defined differently by the individuals within the culture. This is because each individual has a different perception of the symbols meaning, formed by their identity. Psychologist Dan P. McAdams's narrative approach studied an individual's motivations through their biographies-- their life stories. In order to understand understand the relationship of the symbols immersed in the music festival culture, it is necessary to examine each festival goer's

attachment to the symbol (Friedman and Schustack 2009).

To grasp an understanding of this point, I will include an example related to the music festival scene. Take for example the Grateful Dead culture, a subset culture of the music festival subculture. The front man of the band the grateful dead now acts a a symbolic figure within the music festival scene. The Grateful Dead culture's idolization of Jerry Garcia has permeated places further depths than the original idolizers could previously have imagined would have been reached. Every person has a connection to Jerry perceived from different contexts. When I first entered the scene I could not relate to people who had grown up listening to Jerry Garcia, or who have seen him perform live. I will never be able to relate to the meaning he symbolizes to them. What remains for me to perceive as the observer is that his image pervades the culture with imagery. How is it that I can still perceive a connection to his existence through symbolism? I think it lies within my perception as the observer of the emotional ties those that have physical connection to him. His representation evokes almost a feeling that he is worshiped as a religious figure within the community.

Keesing (1987) asked the question, "What, then, about a culture as a system of meanings?". He continues, "Kwaio culture as text-- the symbols deployed in ritual and in everyday life and talk--is there to be "read" by native participants. But the meanings, or at least many of the deeper meanings a symbolist would want to uncover, are not there as part of the text. Many of these meanings need not be shared and public, need not be understood by those who live Kwaio culture, follow its guidelines and procedures, stay within its boundaries. Meanings, we might better say, are not in the cultural texts, not inherent in

cultural symbols, but evoked by them. Some meanings are shared and public, others are not. They are, to change the image back again, deeper layers of the onion. What symbols mean to native actors depends on what they know". Powdermaker (1966) reveals difficulties while doing fieldwork in Hollywood that can be highlighted by Keesing's point. Her participant observation in the Hollywood scene was cut-throat and revealed multiple levels of understanding within the industry, which can be compared to Keesing's metaphor of meanings within a culture being revealed as you reach deeper layers of the onion. Powdermaker was unable to reach the CEO's in Hollywood due to their unwillingness to speak to her. I can sympathize with her, as people are not always open to sharing the meaning behind operations, as experienced in the music festival scene.

From which position should the ethnography be revealed? Keesing (1987) states, "...some problems in the situatedness of "everyday life" and the distribution of knowledge and perspective lie hidden in the seductive goal of seeking shared cultural meanings in social interaction and common sense. Whose "everyday life"? Marx taught us long ago that "everyday life" for a miner or factory worker was a very different realm from "everyday life" for the owner and his family; to be sure, they constructed meanings together, but meanings structured asymmetrically by power and powerlessness, dominance and deference". The park is a business and hosts an influx of people every season. To report on existence of the music festival subculture presents a representation of experience viewed through the ethnographer's eyes, and reflects back to each individual participation within its context.

The responsibility held by anthropologists regarding interpretation and production of

an ethnography, as expressed in an Introduction to Critical Ethnography, discloses, "Representation has consequences: How people are represented is how they are treated (Hall, 1997, as cited in, Introduction Critical Ethnography, p.3)" and "...we must still be accountable for the consequences of our representations and the implications of our message" (p.3). Keesing (1987) suggests that "views of cultures as collective phenomena, of symbols and meanings as public and shared, need to be qualified by a view of knowledge as *distributed* and *controlled*". By discussing the task of converting participant observation into an ethnographic product delivered to various -- professional, personal, and public audiences, I bare my soul, so to speak.

Combining many problems that arise within the art of ethnography, I find it noteworthy that evocation in the terms of continuity is necessary. In other words, the ethnographer shall not come to any solid conclusion, for that would provide an inaccurate interpretation of the culture. Rather, they should be aware of the continual process of revisiting their work to look for deeper connections and new meanings. As time progresses, the culture being studied also progresses. The passing of time and building of experience reshapes the lense in which you viewed the culture. Employing participant observation methodology in term of continuity can help distinguish anthropology's quest to understand the "other".

Joanne Rappaport (2008) presents a similar view, suggesting that anthropology should employ "collaborative research" as a vehicle for theory building. It seems that the macrocosmic view anthropology holds as goal, is best understood in this manner. The modes

of participant observation suggested, in order to scale the quandaries of representation should evoke continuity from the ethnographer. Collaboration in the field, along with members outside of the field is our best shot at creating a comprehensive, holistic view of a culture.

Clifford, James

1986 On Ethnographic Allegory. *In Writing Culture*. James Clifford and George Marcus, eds. Pp. 98-121. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Friedman, Howard, and Miriam Schustack

2009 *Personality: Classic Theories and Modern Research*.

Introduction to Critical Ethnography

Johnson, Avenarius and Weatherford (2006) *The active participant-observer: applying social role analysis to participant observation*.

Keesing, Roger

1985 Conventional Metaphors and Anthropological Metaphysics: The Problematic of Cultural Translation. *Journal of Anthropological Research*. (41)

Keesing, Roger

1987 Anthropology as an Interpretive Quest. *Current Anthropology* 28(2):161-176.

Marcus, George

1986 Contemporary Problems of Ethnography in the Modern World. *In Writing Culture*. James Clifford and George Marcus, eds. Pp. 165-193. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Powdermaker, Hortense

1966 *Stranger and Friend: The Way of an Anthropologist*. Toronto: George J. McLeod Limited.

Rappaport, Joanne

2008 Beyond Participant Observation: Collaborative Ethnography as a Theoretical Innovation. *Collaborative Anthropologies* 1:1-31.

Sapir, E.

1934 The Emergence of the Concept of Personality in a Study of Cultures. *The Journal of Social Psychology* 5(3):408-415.

Tyler, Stephen

1984 Post-Modern Ethnography: From the Document of the Occult to Occult Document. *In Writing Culture*. James Clifford and George Marcus, eds. Pp. 122-140. Berkeley: University of California Press.