Breaking from the Field: Participant Observation and Bourdieu's Participant Objectivation

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CHAPTER 7

Breaking from the Field: Participant Observation and Bourdieu's *Participant Objectivation*

Emma E. Rowe

Introduction

In this chapter, I will explore participant observation as a method within the academy, through a framework of Bourdieu's field theory. This methodology is of interest to Bourdieu, who refers to it as '*participant objectivation*' and 'the highest form of the sociological art' (Bourdieu 1992, p. 259). Despite Bourdieu's enduring interest in ethnographic fieldwork and *participant objectivation,* over many decades of his work (1988, 2003; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), there has been relatively little take-up or exploration of how he practises fieldwork, especially in comparison with the attention paid to many of his other contributions. Certainly, if compared to Bourdieu's (1986) *Forms of Capital*, the concept of *participant objectivation* remains under-developed and under-explored in the broader scope of social sciences. Goodman (2003) points to this, 'it is somewhat surprising that his work has remained largely outside the purview of the literature attentive to the political and ethical

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responsibilities of ethnographic representation' (p. 782). In the widely circulated *Handbook of Ethnography* (2001), for example—which tends to be widely endorsed for graduate students—Bourdieu's fieldwork has little influence. In this handbook, Emerson et al. (2001) describe participant observation as a method that establishes

> … a place in some natural setting on a relatively long-term basis in order to investigate, experience and represent social life and social processes that occur in that setting… [This] comprises one core activity in ethnographic fieldwork. (p. 352)

In these accounts, the sociologist participates in the very research space they are observing and becomes a 'kind of member of the observed group' (Robson 2002, p. 314) by sharing life experiences and learning the group's social conventions and habits. A membership would imply a sense of belonging and acceptance within the research space. Bourdieu presents a radically contrasting account of participant observation, as distinct from the 'natural setting' and orderly process that ethnographic texts depict. In *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology,* Bourdieu (1992) writes,

> What I have called *participant objectivation* (and which is not to be mistaken for participant observation) is no doubt the most difficult exercise of all because it requires a break with the deepest and most unconscious adherences and adhesions. (1992, p. 253, emphasis in original)

Bourdieu continually emphasizes the difficulty of *participant objectivation*, for it requires 'objectivation'. *Objectivation* (as distinct from observation) requires the break and disruption of unconscious knowledge and latent assumptions, the objectification of the researcher, as opposed to the objectification of the participants. I will now briefly turn to how this is reflected in his work, before expanding on three central concepts—the notions of objectivity for the sociologist, 'objectivation' and epistemic reflexivity. The central motif is the critique of power and the (in)visible mechanics of power which are produced, structured and constructed within the research field.

Bourdieu's Participant Objectivation in the Field

For Bourdieu, participant objectivation is ethically precarious and fundamentally political. This is demonstrated throughout his work. Bourdieu continually sought to inhabit and excavate particular social worlds, of which were inherently interested in the construction of cultural and social modes of meaning—traditions, rituals and customs—not as a singular tradition or ritual, but as operative and dependent upon a system and structure which gives it value (Bourdieu, 1977). He immersed himself in landscapes and social worlds experiencing significant political and economic upheaval. For example, Bourdieu conducted fieldwork in Kabylia during the Algerian War, which he draws from in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977). In this work, he critiques social customs, strategies and social 'games' such as marriage. He studied the 'exotic' and the 'familiar' (Wacquant 2004, p. 389), by returning to his native Béarn in south-western rural France in the late 1950s and 1960s (see, Bourdieu 2004, 2008). In *Homo Academicus* (1988), he conducts a sociological analysis of the academic world, looking to trap the 'supreme classifier among classifiers, in the net of his own classifications' (xi). Bourdieu identifies each of these studies—the Kabyle research, the Béarn society (also, *Homo Academicus*)—as instructive in how he thinks about ethnographic fieldwork and 'objectivation' (Bourdieu, 2003). Indeed, his fieldwork is critical for how it shapes his leading theoretical and methodological contributions, including the concepts of habitus and field.

Bourdieu does not extend upon *participant objectivation* in *Homo Academicus*, but rather contends it was the methodological aim in *The Practice of Reflexive Sociology (The Paris Workshop)* (1992). It is debatable why he did not focus on *participant objectivation* in this text, but clearly, Bourdieu became more interested in this method over time. Indeed, he dedicated his Huxley Memorial Lecture in 2002 to *participant objectivation* in order to illuminate this

> technique, a method, or, more modestly, a "device" that has helped me immensely throughout my experience as a researcher: what I call "participant objectivation". I do mean participant "objectivation" and not "observation" (Bourdieu 2003, p. 281).

This method is at the crux of Bourdieu's sociological practice, by accentuating his critique of persistent academic dualisms—objectivity versus

subjectivity; positivist versus interpretivist; and legitimate knowledge versus illegitimate knowledge. This is drawn out by Bourdieu (1989), when asked to characterize the theoretical principles that guide his research: 'If I had to characterize my work in two words, that is, as is the fashion these days, to label it, I would speak of *constructivist structuralism* or of *structuralist constructivism*' (p. 14, emphasis in original). These concepts gesture towards significant methodological concerns for Bourdieu that undergird his field theory—the internalized and externalized structures and constructions of power; the rules and divisions between science and positivism; and the authorization of knowledge.

The Tensions and Prescriptions Within the Field

This chapter is influenced by my own research as a participant observer within the field of education, engaged as both an academic and participant observer within ongoing activist groups for public education. Starting in 2011 as a graduate student, I participated as a researcher–activist within long-term activist groups lobbying the government in Melbourne, Australia. The inner-city lobby groups were demanding a brand new government-funded public high school in their immediate locale (see, Rowe 2014, 2015, 2017). The campaigners graciously granted me permission to participate in their campaigns, and over the course of 18 months, I attended all of their meetings and events, armed with my notepad and pen. I selected participant observation for its ability to 'get inside' and *become* a campaigner, privy to their discourse, action and motivations (Emerson et al. 2001). I found the methodology to be provocative as habitus, not only for the internalized ethical dilemmas that it raised, but also as a method within the *Bourdieusian field*. Practising participant observation within the academy raises barriers and provocations. From inside and within the field, participant observation is ethically contentious and epistemologically contested.

From the start of my study, ethics approval was problematic and required several modifications. As Tope et al. (2005) write, it is 'increasingly difficult' to acquire ethical permission to conduct participant observation,

> University institutional review boards … in recent years [have] made it increasingly difficult for projects based on participant observation to

> receive human subject's clearance. Our conclusions caution against bureaucratic and legalistic curtailments of embedded field observation. (p. 471)

Participant observation is contentious for the method in which it produces knowledge. This is reasonable given the researcher interaction and participation within the research space. Certainly, participant observation retains a contentious history within the academy, evoking a series of ethical restraints and dilemmas (Becker 1958; Calvey 2008; Ellis 1984, 1995; Hinsley 1983). This is illuminated by the controversial work of Carolyn Ellis (1984, 1995), in her covert study of fishing communities, or James Patrick (1973), in his 'undercover' study of street gangs. Gans (1999) criticizes the subjective and introverted uptake of participant observation, particularly when associated under a broad umbrella of 'ethnography' and 'autoethnography'.

When it came time to publish, increasingly, I found that participant observation as a method was problematic for peer reviewers. Peer reviewers baulked at publishing data about educational activists, particularly when it involved participant observation. The pseudonyms of the activists were a point of concern. One reviewer recommended that the pseudonyms be significantly extended to protect the 'vulnerable' campaigners. On the other hand, another academic (superior in the hierarchy) advised me to remove the pseudonyms from the study altogether. He told me the study would have little value or merit if the pseudonyms were to remain.

Arguably, the practice of participant observation within the academy constitutes a struggle, and there are methodological prescriptions and rules for how it is to produce valid, legitimate knowledge. Like all methods, participant observation requires knowledge of the *field*—the rules that govern and sanction how participant observation be ethically practised and contribute 'valid' knowledge. Bourdieu (1992) argues that the sociologist and their instruments function within and via 'objectively hierarchized fields' (p. 257) to legitimize their knowledge. For Bourdieu, failing to pushback and critique this *field* is a critical omission.

Taking up Bourdieu's *participant objectivation* has the potential to advance field theory by illuminating the academy as a contentious and 'bounded' Bourdieusian field. This is further explained by Grenfell and James (2004):

> Any *field* is also 'bounded', and there is that which is included in it and that which is excluded. If we regard educational research as a *field*, as a "configuration of relations", then it is constituted by all that is methodologically possibly within it; in other words, its topography amounts to the range of research activity and the principles that guide it. (p. 510, emphasis in original)

There are many principles guiding participant observation and justifiably so. An underpinning ethical guideline stipulates that fieldwork will be carried out with informed consent, at all times. But there is constant slippage between covert and overt participant observation (Calvey 2008; Li 2008). In her research regarding female gamblers, Li (2008) first participates as a 'participant observer'. Through her regular conversations with women—often casual, unplanned conversations—she finds herself frequently collecting 'data' from uninformed and non-consenting participants. Li adapts her method and level of involvement, yet also finds that women are less inclined to speak with her.

In similarity, as a participant observer within an ongoing activist group, I found that overt and covert observation was, at times, messy and thorny—and not as clear cut as I would have hoped (Ceglowski 2000). In the beginning, the working party graciously granted informed consent for participant observation, enabling me to record field notes at all meetings and events. Initially, the Working Party President introduced me at a meeting and explained the study. This was helpful, in terms of facilitating informed consent from many of the individuals involved. My ethics permission form also required that I do not record any data without receiving informed consent.

Over the course of the following 18 months, I interviewed many campaigners and attended monthly meetings and events as a participant observer (see, Rowe 2017). I often overheard conversations between campaigners—that perhaps they did not want me to hear—and I saw documents that were sometimes withheld from me. I overheard criticisms about the campaigns and those people involved, and I was slow to reach for my pen and paper. As Vaughan (2004) writes, in regard to her own experience as a participant observer, 'the imperative for me to produce a victory narrative about [the school] was quite strong' (p. 393).

The monthly meetings were held in the local pub. At times, only a small group attended of eight or nine people, whereas at other times—particularly during the local government elections—the groups were larger, with

between 20 and 30 people in attendance. The campaigns collected quite generous donations from businesses, such as banks, real estate agents and pharmacies. Councillors who were bidding for local government election would attend and speak to the group, handing out pamphlets and urging their commitment to the group. Many individuals arrived late into the meetings and left early. This does not foreclose the opportunity to acquire informed consent, but it does make it problematic and slippery. Participant observation within a research space is dynamic, changeable and unpredictable—perhaps this is what makes the research meaningful and replete with 'contradictions [and] tensions' (Bourdieu 2003, p. 292).

Breaking from the Field

Bourdieu's fieldwork pushes towards a critique of different nodes of power that are instrumental and mechanical in the spaces we research. By immersing ourselves into pre-designed or pre-selected research spaces as participant observers, this necessitates a self-critical gaze. *Participant objectivation* seeks to fundamentally destabilize and disrupt the scholar's 'quasi-divine viewpoint' (Bourdieu 1992, p. 254) of the superior, all-knowing sociologist. Bourdieu (1992) explicates this further:

> Objectivation of the relation of the sociologist to his or her object is, as we can clearly see in this case, the necessary condition of the break with propensity to invest in her object which is no doubt at the root of her 'interest' in the object. One must in a sense renounce the use of science… (p. 259)

According to Bourdieu, reflexivity requires a critical break or rupture of unconscious knowledge, but it also asks for the academic researcher to re-examine the purposes behind their research, or the self-invested interests that impose 'blind spots indicative of her/his own vested interests' (1992, p. 259). In many ways, the researcher needs to turn the gaze back on their selves, but not for 'narcissistic entertainment' (2003, p. 286) and neither to achieve scientific authority. Rather, to engage with and critique power dynamics and relations, or the '*structuring structures*' (habitus) and 'configuration of relations' (field) that are simultaneously instructive and prescriptive.

The viewpoint I construct, as a participant observer within the academy, is 'not simply the expression of an individual viewpoint' (Kenway

and McLeod 2004, p. 529) but is representative of a particular field, that is, the collective rules and unconscious dispositions and structures of an organization. Bourdieu (1992) argues that because sociologists function inside of the academic field and acquire forms of legitimization within this field, the sociologist believes they are able to achieve a type of 'impartial' interpretation. This impartiality is thereby 'imposed' upon the research participants as a type of 'objective', omnipotent knowledge (p. 257). All observers are dually playing the game (intricately involved in the construction of data) whilst observing the game, whether this is acknowledged or not.

This captures how participant observation becomes epistemologically contested within the academic *field*. The means in which it contributes knowledge is questioned on the grounds of 'objectivity' and 'neutrality'. Bourdieu (1992) expresses uneasiness towards claims of objectivity:

> I thus experienced in a particularly acute manner what was implicated in the claim to adopt the stance of the impartial observer, at once ubiquitous and invisible because dissimulated behind the absolute impersonality of research procedures, and thus capable of taking up a quasi-divine viewpoint…(p. 254)

In his work, Bourdieu engages with the epistemic dualism of the known and the unknown—the objective and the subjective—and constantly provokes it. By immersing himself in the distant Algeria and the familiar Béarn, he juxtaposes the exotic with the familiar, 'the near and the far' (Reed-Danahay 2005, p. 69). His engagement and immersion into the familiar are particularly demonstrated in *Homo Academicus*, and Bourdieu (2003) contends that this research is the most 'scandalous' of all his work, 'the most controversial… despite its extreme concern for objectivity' (p. 283). His work is scandalous in that he challenges the long-standing intellectual debate between anthropologists and ethnologists (e.g. Durkheim 1982) that an ethnographer requires unfamiliar surroundings to truly be objective (Reed-Danahay 2005; Stocking 1983). Bourdieu 'overturns the undiscussed presumption … that one must necessarily be socially distant and culturally different from those whom one studies in order to carry out valid participant observation' (Wacquant 2004, p. 395). Bourdieu recommends epistemic reflexivity as a methodological and theoretical intervention.

Epistemic Reflexivity

Bourdieu describes epistemic reflexivity as a systematic, analytical method, rather than an introspective moment (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). He describes reflexivity as a 'deliberate and methodical exercise' (2003, p. 289), an exercise that is brought to the fore and demanded by *participant objectivation*. The sociologist needs to break from their disinterested gaze and objectify their own epistemological space. Bourdieu (2003) argues that social experience must be '*previously subjected to sociological critique*' (p. 288, emphasis in original). He extends upon this by discussing his fieldwork in Kabylia, writing that 'I was constantly drawing on my experience of the Béarn society of my childhood, both to understand the practices that I was observing and to defend myself' (p. 288). As a participant observer, we draw on our own experiences and our own point of view, to construct and make meaning of our observation. It is the participant observer who 'constructs the space of points of view' (Bourdieu 1992, p. 254). Regardless of whether fieldwork consists of participatory or non-participatory observation, the researcher's perspective and gaze are central to the selection of data (which notes have been recorded in the field and how they have been recorded); the analysis of data; and how data are compiled, selected and constructed into narrative. Fundamentally, the meaning is constructed and produced *by* the researcher.

Even though Bourdieu calls for the sociologist to 'renounce the use of science', he is not calling for a laissez-faire approach. This is what Bourdieu (1992) calls a '*double truth*, objective and subjective, which constitutes the whole truth of the social world' (p. 255, emphasis in original). Grenfell and James (2003) describe this position as an 'attempted synthesis of subjectivism and objectivism' (p. 157). Bourdieu employs both a positivist and an interpretivist lens at different points in time, and he utilizes quantitative and qualitative data, perhaps ironically at times, such as the utilization of percentages, statistics and calculations in *Distinction*. Wacquant (1992) critiques this as a double reading or a 'set of double-focus analytic lenses that capitalize on the epistemic virtues of each reading while skirting the vices of both' (p. 7).

Bourdieu's method borrows from both sides of the methodological fence, and the fence itself—the division between the two—is critically damaging:

> I am profoundly convinced that this scientifically damaging division must be overthrown and abolished; but also, as you will have seen, because it was a way of exorcising the painful schism, never entirely overcome, between two parts of myself, and the contradictions or tensions that it introduces into my scientific practice and perhaps into my whole life. (Bourdieu 2003, p. 292)

The positivist and interpretivist methodological division functions as a type of field—a configuration of relations that impose determinations and rules—but also as a habitus that overlaps and distinguishes between the ethically tasteful and epistemologically fashionable. Yet, the methodological tension and structural divisiveness do not call for abandonment of processes and practice (Bourdieu 2003), more so it operates as a double truth and antinomy.

For Bourdieu, *participant objectivation* accentuates the crux of this 'painful schism'. It is neither observation nor participant observation, and nor is it positivism or interpretivism. He explains that a sociologist need not 'have to choose' between being an observer ('who remains as remote from himself as from his object') and a participant observer ('a necessarily fictitious immersion in a foreign milieu') (Bourdieu 2003, p. 282). *Participant objectivation* combines subjectivity and objectivity; it is participant and observer; and it does this by exploring:

> … not the 'lived experience' of the knowing subject but the social conditions of possibility—and therefore the effects and limits—of that experience, and, more precisely, of the act of objectivation itself. It aims at objectivizing the subjective relation to the object which, far from leading to a relativistic and more-or-less anti-scientific subjectivism, is one of the conditions of genuine scientific objectivity (Bourdieu 2001). (Bourdieu 2003, p. 282)

Recognizing the 'act of objectivation' (and therefore, the rationale in why Bourdieu refers to this method as participant objectivation) is to struggle with the crux of Bourdieu's field theory. Rather than denying the inherent subjectivity in our research—from selecting the research space, the participants and what we publish—we must recognize how we are complicit within the field, our role as researcher, and also how we are complicit in objectifying the field and the participants. As scholars, as observers, interviewers and participant observers, we are objectifying

the participants as 'data', rationalizing and representing. It is crucial to acknowledge this in order to strive for greater consciousness and scales of objectivity in producing knowledge.

Concluding Discussion

In this chapter, I have focused on *participant objectivation* as a lens to critique Bourdieu's field theory within the social sciences. Bourdieu's *participant objectivation* reveals formative 'thinking tools' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1989, p. 50) for the sociologist, in its attempt to break from the *field* and struggle with modes of relational and structural power.

I argued that Bourdieu's *participant objectivation* illuminates persistent academic dualisms, related to objectivity and subjectivity, positivism and interpretivism. His work captures the importance of the critical gaze, not simply applied to the participants, but by objectifying ourselves within the research practice. Critiquing the *field* means critiquing the methodology and the structures in which we produce knowledge and claim objectivity and truth within the academy.

Kenway and McLeod (2004) argue that Bourdieu 'overstates the distinctiveness of his project of reflexivity' (p. 529), and positivism is presented as 'monolithic and simple' (p. 529). Whilst Bourdieu's method may have shortcomings in the way it identifies and deals with positivism, exploring his fieldwork is arguably useful for a greater understanding of his theoretical and methodological contributions. Bourdieu calls for epistemic reflexivity and consciousness as an analytical and methodological approach to sociological knowledge. It advocates for ethnographers to incur and provoke personal discomfort in their research space. By entering into and living in locations which Bourdieu describes as foreign and faraway, but also the research spaces he 'knew without knowing' (2002, p. 10), Bourdieu opens up the possibility for ethnographers to reconfigure the rules of the field. However, this ultimately requires a critical engagement and critique of our structural dispositions. *Participant objectivation* calls for objectification of the sociologist and a complete rupture or break from their ontological and epistemological space. I use the term 'space' in this instance to emphasize Bourdieu's 'spaces of point of view' (1992). When it comes to *participant objectivation*, the sociologist immerses themselves within a pre-constructed space of interaction and 'wields a form of domination' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 253).

The space is critical in constructing and structuring the relations and the dispositions, the field and the habitus.

Bourdieu's ethnography represents methodological multiplicity and fusion, as opposed to compartmentalization and epistemological dualities. There is a systematic approach to how Bourdieu practises epistemic reflexivity (Grenfell and James 2003), and this is where Bourdieu's scientific underpinnings are accentuated. His concepts of habitus and field are useful in thinking about the rules and methodological injunctions that govern how participant observation is legitimized and validated. Bourdieu's fieldwork enables a reconfiguration of the power dynamics and domination of the sociologist in spaces of observation.

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