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Observing conducted tours: The ethnographic context in tourist research

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ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS: *tourism research, participant observation, unobtrusive observation, coach parties*

This paper explores observational contexts in ethnographic methodologies, deploying participant and unobtrusive observation in research designed to monitor the existential world of the tourist, including perceptions and satisfactions, during the course of the tourism event. The paper differentiates between two contrasting contexts of ethnographic observation — the open field and the closed field — and sets out to inventory some of the distinctive problems and opportunities associated with each.

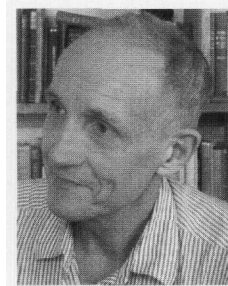
The paper draws attention to the importance of the conducted touring party as a social grouping

that may be envisaged, both historically and in contemporary terms, as the primary unit of tourism, and reaffirms the potential of unobtrusive and participant observational methods for studying it. The analysis and discussion have practical relevance for both theoretical and applied tourism researchers.

INTRODUCTION

The ethnographic matters discussed in this paper arose from an exploratory study of a conducted coach party touring the First World War battlefields of the Somme and Flanders which was undertaken using unobtrusive and participant observation in April 1998. The substantive findings of the study have been separately published,¹ and this paper deals exclusively with methodological issues relating to the use and benefits of participant and unobtrusive observation in tourism satisfaction research. In order to provide a backdrop to the discussion it is worth summarising the threefold aims of the original study.

— To understand the ways in which battle-field sites in France and Flanders were constructed as tourist events, and in parti-



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cular how the itinerary choices and coding practices of the tour organiser impacted on the resultant meanings articulated by the visitors. Since most of the landscape of the First World War in Europe has now vanished, or been radically changed by time, the question was how the theatre of war was presented and represented and what was its impact. The study, in short, was concerned with *what* was visited, *how* it was visited, and the *constructed meaning* attached to it by both the tour organiser and the visitors.

- To provide insight into the kind of people who visited the battlefields. In addition to obtaining socio-demographic information, the study set out to explore the nature of the visitors' interest in the First World War battlefields, and their relationship to the events and participants commemorated.
- Though the first two aims were focused on the First World War specifically, the study was designed to explore issues relating to battlefield tourism in general, and the visiting of sites of violence and death that has variously been called Thanatourism,^{2,3} 'dissonant' tourism⁴ or 'dark tourism'.⁵

The meanings and satisfactions of travel, as Cohen has argued in relation to one of its putative elements, the quest for 'authenticity',⁶ may best be understood as dynamically emergent products of specific situated contexts and interests, rather than as processes that can be read off from motivational inventories, based on a priori inferences and categories. Since all the focal questions of the research involved issues of personal meanings, a qualitative, ethnographic methodology, based on participant observation in a natural context (the battlefield tour), was preferred to others. This approach contrasted with the dominant tendency in writing on motivational aspects of tourism behaviour to produce extended lists of discrete motivations or clustered groupings, derived from quantitative surveys and structured interviews administered outside the natural settings of 'real life'. Participant

observation was chosen as a means of capturing the meanings and satisfactions of battlefield tourism as it happened, rather than trying to assess motivation outside the context of the behaviour under scrutiny.

THE METHODOLOGY

The pros and cons of participant observation as a methodology have been extensively discussed in standard texts.^{7,8} The use of participant observation in studies where symbolic meanings and discursive practices within micro-groups and brief encounters are focal issues has a long tradition in sociology,^{9,10} and has been recently reaffirmed in the emerging field of social movement research:

'Sociologists of culture have increasingly heeded C. Wright Mills' directive that sociologists study motives by people's vocabularies rather than their psyches. Explaining people's motives, on this view, means listening for the ways people explain or justify what they do, rather than treating motives as reflections of psychological needs or socio-structural interests that exist outside the world of symbol and meaning.'¹²

Participant observation has been particularly deployed, as here, in the sociology of relations in the micro-spaces of leisure and hospitality across a wide range of contexts, including restaurant social structure,¹³ cab-drivers and their fares,¹⁴ bar room relations,¹⁵ informal communication in tea rooms,¹⁶ motor bike culture¹⁷ and coach tour guiding.¹⁸

The participant observation schedule involved three days of touring which amounted to 36 hours of contact on the coach or off it at sites. In addition to the interactions during the day, contact was made with many of the passengers socially over meals and to a limited extent with some of the party during periods of 'free time' in the evening and during meal breaks etc.

Three main forms of recording were used: a daily log of timed stops and starts was kept; the log was augmented by qualitative notes written up during the course of the trip and after each stop; and at the end of each day

further notes were made of summing comments with notes on emerging themes and hypotheses. All these were written in rough form on return from the trip and then gestated over a period of six months before an attempt at systematic analysis was attempted. The combination meant that the researcher adopted three participant modes in the fieldwork: as passenger note-taker and log-book recorder during the tour; as conversational eavesdropper at stops; and as social participant at lunch, at night etc.

The purpose of this paper is to report on methodological issues specific to the research, and to offer reflections on the ethnographic procedures and problems posed by different kinds of observational context.

THE CONDUCTED TOUR; TOURISM'S HERMETICALLY SEALED TRAVELLING LABORATORY

One of the existential features of membership of a conducted group like a coach party is to produce a powerful sense of enclosure and boundedness. As the party moved through the landscapes of northern France and Belgium over the three days, there was a recurrent sense of being a closed, hermetic community, united in and focused on the single tourism purpose at hand. The conducted touring party may be seen as the original, primary unit of package tourism both historically and in contemporary practice. The distinguishing features of the first Thomas Cook tours were that they were *conducted* in two senses; first, in that participants were conducted by a common form of transport that effectively created them as a closed community on the move; secondly they were conducted, in being led and managed by a guide who acted as cultural broker and mentor to them as an acolyte community. Modern package tourism still operates around groups of people conveyed by a shared form of transport, accommodated communally and pastorally mentored by guides. The conducted tour party may thus be seen as a hermetically sealed, synthetic community, created through the accident of

common participation in travel, under the tutelage of a common mentor-guide.

Turner has attributed developing processes of *liminality* and *communitas* as characteristics of pilgrimages,^{19,20} and these have since been seen as features of tourism. According to the pilgrimage analogy, tourists cross thresholds from everyday life into a freer, heightened state of being, and develop a sense of communion and belonging through being thrown together with others and sharing a common goal. Though these two processes might be features of extended tours where subjects interact over a longer period, they were less obvious in a short tour convened around a specialised itinerary — visiting battlefields. The state of the passengers was less one of *communitas* and *liminality* as of a constructed *collegiate* study group with one focal interest that was constantly reinforced by frequent stops to view representative sights and sites embodying that interest.

The hermetic quality of a tour party makes it, from the researcher's point of view, a quintessential travelling laboratory for academics wishing to understand the dynamics of tourism in natural settings, and the specific features and motivations attached to the many and particular forms of tourism around which conducted tours take place.

Equally important, but less obvious, is the fact that ethnographic observation of such a group is different from observations of populations not so homogeneously gathered within a bounded spatial and temporal world as a coach party. Ethnographic observations, in short, present different problems and opportunities for the researcher, according to the context in which they are made. It is this central issue that the rest of the paper seeks to explore.

CLOSED- AND OPEN-FIELD ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXTS

The starting point for the analysis is to postulate two kinds of ethnographic context, which may be called open field and closed field. In the closed-field situation the researcher and the research population conjointly exist with-

in a discrete, temporal and spatial setting as co-actors in a drama whose bounds are set by the span of the event in which they are participating. Examples would include any party travelling together by car, train or air, and/or living together for a temporary period in common accommodation.

An open-field context, by contrast, is one where the researcher and research population are not united within a common spatial and temporal field, but exist as separate and independent actors, within parallel, though partly overlapping rather than identical, time and spatial fields. An example would be an anthropologist conducting fieldwork on the cultural impact of tourism in a village where s/he might be housed, accepted and even welcomed locally, but never exist as a cultural peer in the existential space of the studied group. In short, while the researcher as observer in the open context situation is always, ultimately a stranger in another culture, in the former s/he may be accepted through seeming to be a co-equal — as, in this instance, a member of a touring party. To some degree the differences correspond to the differences between participant observation and non-participant observation, but not completely. Some kinds of participant observation may be open field — for example, Whyte's seminal study of Chicago gangs,²¹ Willis's study of motorbike cultures²² and any other situation where a researcher is accepted as a member of a community, but where there is no hermetic spatial or temporal boundary like that for coach tours and similar events.

However, few kinds of non-participant observation are closed field. It may be that it is difficult to maintain social distance in small bounded spaces, so that the observer always has to become a participant, or maybe that in micro spaces people resist or reject the intrusive presence of outside observers — unless, they are carrying cameras for fly-on-the-wall documentaries.

Once these two kinds of field context have been established, it is possible to draw out a number of contrasts between them in the opportunities and problems they pose for the ethnographic observer of tourists.

The problems of induction and acculturation into closed- and open-field groups

In traditional forms of open-field observation the researcher arrives as a stranger in the group under observation and must secure acceptance and trust, and minimise the reaction his or her presence as an outsider may provoke. Margaret Mead precisely captured the problems of ethnographic induction in tribal settings:

'[The ethnologist] must slip in quietly, lower himself or herself as gently as possible into the placid waters of native life, make the unprecedented arrival of an inquiring white person as inconspicuous as possible.'²³

This induction problem may be called the 'mole under cover' syndrome that confronts plain-clothes policemen penetrating criminal groups. It exists in all ethnographic situations where the researcher is perceived to be a non-member, or non-typical member, of the group s/he is studying. Once inducted into the setting, the researcher may also have to make profound adjustments to understand and record the cultural frame of the subjects, whether foreign tribes or domestic subcultures. In the cases of people like Mead, Freya Stark and other traveller-anthropologists such adjustments often involved considerable preparation before access, and struggle once access had been gained. If acceptance is too great, another problem may develop: that of becoming so much an insider that the researcher starts affecting the research situation under study as an active participant. (This also has its police work equivalent in the '*agent provocateur*' effect.)

In the kind of closed-context event described in this paper, none of these problems is experienced. The researcher, as one of the travelling party, is initially an outsider among outsiders who later becomes an insider, through membership of the package tour and participation within it. Access and adjustment are rapid, if not instantaneous. The researcher is also likely to share cultural attributes with at least some of the party (language, nationality). In summary the reac-

tion problem is avoided since the researcher is perceived as a peer through membership of the temporal and spatial community that constitutes the closed-context group of the conducted party.

The timing of observations in closed- and open-field contexts

A related issue concerns timing. In open-field contexts the researcher has the problem of choosing the moment of ethnographic entry into the life of the group, its duration and the moment of exit. Theoretically these are difficult decisions to make because of the problems of knowing where and when to make the entry, and how long observations should be before they are complete. It has to be said that, in practice, these issues are largely disregarded in many research situations since the observer's moment of entry and exit is often determined by expediency, such as period of grant funding, constraints of time available due to other commitments, logistic travel factors (eg availability of transport to remote places at particular times of the year), opportunism through finding a key informant able to advance the ethnographic induction etc. There is no certain method of knowing about the group or community's status *before* the ethnographic entry, nor what changes may affect them *after* ethnographic observation finishes. Some preliminary reconnoitring before the full fieldwork begins may reveal clues, but the researcher can never be sure to what extent the period of his/her fieldwork coincides with typical patterns of life in the group or community under study. Cultures are rarely static, so the modern researcher must constantly be aware of the possible temporal specificity of the data. In the work of older anthropologists, from Tylor to Lévi-Strauss, the main temporal assumptions were that ethnic groups had been unchanged for centuries, if not millennia, so that their prior conditions were of little importance or interest; the main temporal problem was to 'catch' and record their immemorial culture for posterity before it was transformed or

destroyed by Western influence. Such anthropological studies were conceived as snapshots of the about-to-disappear, literally studies in dying civilisations. This assumption that ethnic tribes had existed in a state of immemorial changelessness before the white man arrived, and would have no culture afterwards, has been criticised in the last ten years.²⁴

In the closed-field context of conducted tours and packages none of these problems exists. The researcher is there at the start right through to the end. The period of the tour's duration incorporates an absolute and unambiguous closure that resides in discrete events. This is not to say that understanding tour behaviour does not involve inferring antecedent circumstances about the subjects under study, or consequent impacts upon them. In the battlefield tour it was clear that for some of the party the tour was an extension of interests that structured many other aspects of their life and leisure, and would do so in the future. However, what could be confidently asserted was that the researcher had been present for the duration of the whole delineated event under study, the tour, a claim that is never possible in open-field contexts.

Sample determination in closed and open fields

Similarly, the closed-field event allows the researcher an absolute confidence in sampling and role specification of the subjects under study. Their number is known from the outset and stays the same. It is the number of people in the tour, and the observer is able to monitor them all. Moreover, all members occupy a common, initial role — as tourists under the jurisdiction of a guide or guiding group. In the closed-field context, it may even be possible to gain preliminary data on the observational group before the event under study actually begins. In studying a tour party, for example, the researcher may be able to obtain a guest list and profile the individuals in terms of age, geographic origin and so on, as Foster was able to do in his study of cruise life.²⁵

The task of identifying the number and roles of all the members of populations in open-field ethnographic contexts — for example, in the observation of beach behaviour or work with a resident community at a resort or rural attraction — is more difficult, since both the number involved and their individuated roles within the group or community under study may only become clear after prolonged periods of observation, not least because members will rarely all be present for very long in one place at the same time.

Free and captive audiences in open and closed contexts

In open-field contexts the population under study may be elusive. The researcher cannot mandate the attendance, or control the comings and goings of members of the research population. Members may terminate relations temporarily or for long periods. In his classic observational study of Chicago gangs, Whyte reported the difficulties of fieldwork when subjects failed to appear or went missing.²⁶ Lévi-Strauss noted the same problem with tribal respondents: '... for days on end you have to repress all curiosity and withdraw into an attitude of research because of some sudden change of mood on the part of the tribe'.²⁷

In hermetic, closed fields the population under study remains present throughout the event. This means that the researcher has less 'dead time' when the subjects are out of the frame of observation, except in the intervals for meals and at the end of the day, and even then the researcher may participate in some of the 'free-time' activities not spent as a collective group. During the battlefield tour the researcher ate and took part in shopping expeditions with some of the party that were not part of the formal organisation of the tour.

Role maintenance of research populations in open- and closed-field contexts

Another difference between ethnographic observation of closed-context events of short

duration and open-field ones that last longer is in the degree of role maintenance of the population under study. In the closed-field event the population may retain a high level of role involvement, through the situational support provided by the hermetically sealed geography of the occasion. The enclosed coach setting and the relationship of mentor-acolyte between the guide group and passengers serve to heighten and reinforce the tourism purpose at hand, producing a kind of existential focusing on prescriptive agendas that might be less intensively pursued in open-field contexts. The members of a coach party are not allowed to forget that they are there to be tourists, and are incessantly enjoined to inhabit the parts they are meant to play and the researcher to observe. There is a pressure in closed-field contexts towards sustained role maintenance and clarity.

This may produce an interesting additional effect for the researcher to evaluate — the phenomenon of *excessive* role maintenance. Through the hothousing induced by the social and geographical boundedness of the event, the subject may manifest greater commitment and identification to the occasion and its agendas than would be the case in a freer situation. This may be called the 'football fanatic syndrome', a reference to the observable fact that even moderate football supporters may exhibit greater extremes of vociferous enthusiasm and commitment to soccer in the hermetically sealed company of others on a bus or in an enclosure than they would in a freer situation. Thus the real significance of soccer in their lives may be inflated through situational conditions that result in an overproduction of involvement (warm-up artists and canned applause are known to have the same effect on studio audiences for TV shows). There are, however, some fans for whom the enthusiasm may be a symptom of in-group participation that is less dependent on situational geography.

In open-context events of longer duration the degree of role maintenance and involvement may be reduced, diffused or deflected, simply because over a longer period an in-

dividual may permutate or negotiate many roles, some of which may not be centrally related to the behaviour in which the researcher is primarily interested. From the researcher's point of view the subject may 'lose the plot' and bring other role definitions and aspects of self to the main one under study (eg a drug user may spend an afternoon gambling on horses or talking about football, rather than his addiction). Of course, the ethnographer may decide, for some kinds of research subject, that *everything* a respondent offers is of interest so that role slippage may be as much a part of the data as more overt role maintenance.

Sub-group constitution and stability in open and closed contexts

Related to the previous point, in closed-fields events sub-groups within the main population under study may form and stabilise more quickly than in open-field events that last longer. In coach tourism the relationships of the sub-groups within the party will be particularly stable if fixed seating positions evolve, so that the same people always sit with each other. In the battlefield tour seating positions became fixed from the start, partly because a high number of the tour members had come in social groups from the beginning. In longer package tours the guides tend to discourage premature spatial possessiveness and encourage people to move round in order to maximise interactions within the whole party. Seating choices can be systematically monitored over time by participant observers, by running off blank seating plans of the coach and recording changing positions after each stop.

Sensory monitoring fields in open and closed contexts

A further difference between open- and closed-field observational contexts is the spatial extent of monitoring required. In open-field ethnography the researcher may need to make observations in a diverse number of

locations in order to collect adequate data on the population under study. A tourism impact study in a region, for example, inevitably involves many systematic observations in a range of settings.

In closed-field observations the spatial dimensions are more contained, so that the logistics of monitoring are easier. In the coach party study the main monitoring fields were the interior of the coach and the paths traversed by the party as they toured the war sites. This smaller monitoring field allowed for multi-sensory observations on a continuous basis. On the coach it was found that a seat in the centre of the coach proved to be the best position for the researcher, since it allowed the hearing of conversations from fore and aft while offering a good field of vision for interactions taking place in front, including the guides' addresses to the party. In general that element of unobtrusive observation which has been elegantly called 'systematic lurking'²⁸ is easier within a small, bounded field than when the researcher must monitor a wider, more diverse number of people-scapes.

Recording facilitation

All ethnographic observation has to be recorded, and the gap between observation and recording can make an obvious difference to the accuracy and 'thickness' of the descriptions secured. Open- and closed-field contexts offer differences for the researcher in the ease and difficulty of recording data. In closed contexts like coaches, trains and cruise boats it is easier to record observations on the spot since pretexts can be found for writing, almost 'as things happen'. Tourists are expected to spend time writing postcards, letters and keeping diaries. Thus overheard conversations can be reported verbatim, and immediate observations made in detail that, in more open settings, might have to be delayed, or made after making excuses to leave.

There is, of course, an ethical dimension involved here, and in relation to a number of other aspects of unobtrusive/participant observation. However, it may be argued that

the subject populations monitored in tourism research are at less pains to conceal or camouflage their behaviour (except in a comparatively small range of cases involving such activities as sex tourism, holiday crime etc) than that in other kinds of social research, where covert surveillance and disclosure by researchers involve greater ethical dilemmas. Moreover, in tourism research the researcher is only doing systematically what all the observed subjects are doing unsystematically, as an inherent part of the tourism experience — people watching. In the study on which this paper was based the question of surveillance and disclosure was negotiated in two ways: at the start of the battlefield tour the researcher half-declared himself as a researcher whose subject was the battlefields of the First World War, and he gave out questionnaires that flagged this researcher role; secondly, in publishing the results all names and places of origin were changed so that identification of respondents was impossible. Finally, it is worth remarking that quantitative research in which large populations are surveyed, and in which the results are then made available to large corporations or state departments, and in many cases correlated with other kinds of data on the subjects involved, poses much greater ethical questions than short-term observations of holidaymakers.

In the open-field context there may be delays between observation and report. The researcher may have to concoct reasons to make temporary exits to note observations or conversation, or at best take notes in covert ways that are less necessary in closed-context tourism situations.

The time frame of open- and closed-field observations

In one major respect open-field contexts offer the ethnographer a great advantage over short-term, closed-field observational contexts in tourism — the opportunity they afford for repeated observations. Because of the indefinite time frame²⁹ that may be associated with open-field research situa-

tions, recurrent and multiple observations are possible, so that the researcher may triangulate the data rather than relying upon one or two instances.

In the closed-field context, the researcher studying short-trip behaviour faces time pressures that much reduce or eliminate the opportunity for multiple observations. Moreover, when faced with ambiguity, contradictions or lack of clarity, there may be no opportunity for repeat observations if the event has ended. Call-back may be possible after a tour or cruise, but it is likely to be unsatisfactory because the context of everyday life is so different from the ludic time space of holidays; recollecting a holiday is very different from commenting on it as it happens. Call-back is only likely to be valuable if the study is specifically about the aftereffects of holidays.

Significance of data

Finally the closed-field short event may yield disappointing results for the researcher due to the inability of the researcher to make enough observations of all the party in the time available. By contrast, extended observations should afford a greater depth of data. This provokes an interesting question as to whether a short break is ever as ethnographically researchable as a longer holiday where the researcher has more time to circulate and observe. This raises the possibility that, in some ethnographic situations, it may be desirable to use more than one observer to offset the time constraints of short, hermetic events.

The differences between the two contexts just discussed may be summarised in Table 1.

DISCUSSION

This paper has so far attempted to highlight the potential value for the tourism researcher of closed-field ethnographic observations compared to open-field contexts. It has argued that the hermetic, quasi-collegiate character of the conducted tour may be seen as the primary social unit of tourism which can be found in package tours, cruises, hotel

Table 1: Contrasts between open- and closed-field ethnographic observations in tourist research

<i>Open field</i>	<i>Closed field (coach party)</i>
Researcher is stranger in group and must build trust, acceptance and non-reactive 'invisibility'	Researcher is apparent member with no barriers of 'reactance' or adaptation to overcome
Problem of induction into world views/salience of issues in unknown culture etc	Coach party normally from same culture/world view as researcher
Problem of entry time and exit into group culture	Finite event where researcher can be present from start to finish
Unknown sample size and profiles initially	Full sample known and can be profiled before, during or after trip
Free respondents	Captive audience
Dead researcher time (respondents out of frame of observation)	Reduction in dead time, access to free time (meals, recreational breaks)
Fluid group constitution	Stable group constitution, particularly if seating positions stabilise
Role slippage or ambiguity of role among sample	Continuous role maintenance/clarity. Football fanatic syndrome?
Large monitoring field	Small monitoring field (in hearing, vision, sensory reach) thus higher chance of noting and recording
Difficulty of immediate recording	Ease of immediate recording
Recurrent observation to indefinite time frame possible	Compressed, finite time for observations
Return observations possible	No return
Extended observations should afford depth of data	Short tours may provide limited data

short breaks and many kinds of transport-specific tours. It is one that effectively offers the researcher a travelling laboratory which can be readily accessed, studied and reported in ways that are more difficult under open field conditions, or using other methodologies.

Participant and unobtrusive observations in closed-field contexts may also offer valuable insights into the monitoring of festival events. A study carried out at a multi-programme Easter festival in Scotland showed how unobtrusive observation augmented the main quantitative visitor study,³⁰ and its findings have since been replicated in a study of an Australian opera festival.³¹

Given the possibilities of real-life observation in tourism research, it is surprising that there have been comparatively few participant observational studies of tourists, closed field or open field, compared, for example, with the developed use of participant observation in other fields such as industrial

relations. Tourism sociologists and anthropologists have been relatively slow to engage at an observational level with the subjects they have theorised frequently at a distance, as a cursory examination of the main tourism journals since the 1970s will suggest. Some of the most influential extended studies of tourists^{32,33} have been based on distanced reflection, often influenced by French structuralism and semiotics, in which tourists have been categorised as a species with monolithic traits (what world of overarching simplification lies in that construct, 'the tourist?'), rather than through primary engagement with their subjects. On the other hand there have been numerous quantitative, empiricist studies in academia and industry that have used questionnaire inventories to investigate tourists in relation to a wide variety of expectations, motivations and satisfactions, but using categories pre-determined by researchers rather than from the phenomenological world of the tourist. Tourism

researchers sometimes seem happier to theorise the mass tourist from the safety of a research library, or through tick boxes on a clip board, rather than through observational engagement that might require direct contact.

There have been a number of exceptions to this general picture in observational articles that have mainly been published in one journal, *Annals of Tourism Research*. Among them should be noted important work by Holloway³⁴ and Gottlieb,³⁵ and three interesting observational studies of the closed field of cruise packages.^{36–38} In addition Pearce, Dann, Bruner and Nash have made intermittent interventions into participant and unobtrusive observation that are scattered across different book chapters and articles.

And it seems that there is more to come. Recent researchers who constitute tourism's second generation of tourism scholars have adopted the view that if one wants to understand tourists one had better go out and join them to observe for oneself, rather than relying on a French scholastic hermeneuticism to save the trouble. In this new climate the work of Seleannemi³⁹ and Wickens^{40–42} is significant, not just for the use of observational measures but in at last taking mass tourism seriously, rather than quarantining it through stereotypical perceptions from a safe distance. In so doing they suggest that mass tourists are neither undifferentiated, passive dolts nor the gaze-hungry scopophiliacs of the Foucaultian paradigm. The work of Bowen⁴³ in a similar mass tourism context shows how observational studies need sacrifice nothing in conceptual rigour, but may be used as a triangulation methodology for testing theory.

It is in the spirit of this more engaged theorising of tourism through observation that this paper developed. It seeks to re-endorse the value of participant observation in general, and the relevance of closed-field observations in particular, since it is in closed-field events such as package holidays and tours that the quantitative heartland of tourism lies. Observational studies of closed-field tourism events offer great opportunities for research that generates the 'thick description' and emic understanding that are the

ultimate goals of qualitative methodology. But they can only be realised by researchers who are prepared to get out a bit more.

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