

Complete Participation

The highest level of involvement for ethnographers probably comes when they study a situation in which they are already ordinary participants. Nash (1975) rode the bus each day to the University of Tulsa and decided to do an ethnography of busriders. He was a complete participant, had learned the rules for riding the bus, and simply began to make systematic observations during the course of this daily activity. In another ethnographic study, Nash (1977) made use of his complete involvement in long-distance running to do ethnography of bus riders. He was a complete participant, had learned the hospital came about because, shortly after finishing graduate work, he became a patient. Becker studied jazz musicians, and writes:

I gathered the material for this study by participant observation, by participating with musicians in the variety of situations that make up their work and leisure lives. At the same time I made the study I had played the piano professionally for several years and was active in musical circles in Chicago (1963:83-84).

The examples of ethnographers who have turned ordinary situations in which they are members into research settings could go on and on. Indeed, in an excellent article, "Varieties of Opportunistic Research," Riemer (1977) reviews numerous studies based on complete involvement by anthropologists and sociologists, including home towns, cab driving, bars, police departments, prisoner-of-war activities, a chiropractic clinic, race tracks, carnivals, and even the Coast Guard Academy. The beginning ethnographer may want to follow these examples and search for opportunities close at hand. I would offer one word of caution: the more you know about a situation as an ordinary participant, the more difficult it is to study it as an ethnographer. It is no accident that ethnography was born and devel-

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oped in the study of non-Western cultures. The *less* familiar you are with a social situation, the *more* you are able to see the tacit cultural rules at work.

As you make a final selection of a social situation to study, keep in mind the possibilities for involvement. The techniques you will learn in the following steps will serve you well at any degree of involvement, from nonparticipation to complete participation. Using these techniques you can discover the cultural knowledge underlying professional wrestling matches on television or the cultural rules for behavior in a college classroom. And once you have learned the strategies for asking ethnographic questions, collecting ethnographic data, and recording and analyzing that data, you can use these skills to understand the culture of more complex social worlds.