One Foot In, One Foot Out: The Paradox of Participant-Observation

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Abstract

This paper explores the utility of participant-observation as a method for studying organizations. Participant-observation as a method of organizational ethnography is paradoxical in requiring researchers to immerse themselves in the culture via participation and to simultaneously observe the artifacts, espoused values, and assumptions of the culture. Self consciousness and awareness and managing the boundary between researcher and member are also critical. Key concepts such as neuroplasticity, attachment, and transference and countertransference will be considered and applied to offer deeper understanding of how organizational researchers can mindfully apply this methodology to understand organizations. We describe the traditional notion of participant-observation, explore concepts from the psychoanalytic and neuroscience literature, and discuss what we know from neuroscience, attachment, and psychoanalytic theories that might enhance and advance the use and effectiveness of participant-observation in organizational research.
Participant-observation (PO) has been employed as a method for studying cultures, including organizational cultures, for many years. However, participant-observation is traditionally practiced without a guiding theoretical framework. As a methodology for studying organizations, it requires a different way of thinking about the role of the researcher inside organizations. It is a role that has multiple dimensions making it uniquely taxing and rewarding; allowing for a deeper understanding of participants’ experience of organizational culture. Thus, we assume that the role of participant-observer is paradoxical in that the individual researchers have to position themselves inside and outside the organization simultaneously. Organizational immersion poses specific challenges for participant-observers, suggesting that the organizational researcher needs special training and preparation for this type of study. To fully appreciate this difficult role one requires concepts that illuminate and heighten consciousness of self and others.

Certain concepts from contemporary psychoanalytic theory are instructive and insightful to the effort of organizational ethnography. Participant-observers need to establish a “good enough” transitional psychological space between themselves and organizational members. This enables the observation of and reflection on organizational culture while minimizing the anxiety of organizational members (Diamond & Allcorn, 1993; Winnicott, 1971). This notion fits well with the idea of applying the self as an instrument of research and the clinical psychoanalytic concepts of transference and counter-transference. Thus, participant-observers ought to be aware of their own reactions to organizational culture, and simultaneously to those distinctive behaviors of organizational participants. An additional consideration to psychoanalytically informed participant-observation is the knowledge contributed by neuroscience research. The
neurosciences have the potential to enhance what we know about ourselves as researchers, and the organizational participants with whom we partner.

This paper explores the utility of participant-observation as a method for studying organizations from the vantage point of three paradigms: attachment theory, relational psychoanalytic theory, and neuroscience. We begin by describing the traditional approach to participant-observation. We then explore concepts from the psychoanalytic and the neuroscience literature including how brain activity relates to specific mental states. We then discuss what we know from the neuroscience, attachment, and psychoanalytic theories, and how it can enhance and advance participant-observation in organizational research.

Participant-observation: A Traditional Methodology

Defined over 130 years ago, culture is described as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor, 1871). Knowledge claims and thick descriptions of culture required a qualitative method embedded in the ethnographic approach of telling stories and proffering meaning and insight into the lives of “others.” This method to field work is what we call participant-observation and its primary goal is that of interpretation of human cultures (Rosen, 1991). Yet, participant-observation is described in a variety of ways. For some it is a "mode-of-being" (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998) or a way of knowing (Yanow, 2009). It can be thought of as a “transformation of sociability” (Churchill & Whalen, 2005), or as an art that reveals or creates meaning (Wolcott, 1995). It is also considered a strategy for understanding cultural participants by assuming a “role” within their social context (Wolcott, 1995; Skogstad, 2004). Simply defined, participant-observation is a naturalistic research method in which the researcher...
has prolonged and intense interaction with those being studied. Data gathered are generally narrative descriptions based on the observations and daily experiences of the researcher.

Fieldwork, the process of doing participant-observation, is an intentional endeavor that culminates in “writing up” a cultural story that is the constructed interpretation of the ethnographer (Van Maanen, 1988; Wolcott, 1995). The intensity of interaction with cultural participants is what enriches the data collected by participant-observers. Immersion involves the full attention of the researcher who is completely surrounded by the culture.

Immersion enables a deeper understanding of what it means to be a member (or insider) in contrast with what can be obtained by a disinterested and detached, experience-distant, outsider. Participant observers take an experiential perspective on the everyday life of cultural participants. Ideally, participant-observers are able to remain immersed in the culture long enough that they are able to witness serendipitous opportunities; events that have significance when compared to the ordinary (Wolcott, 1995). Immersion of the fieldworker in the cultural context being studied also allows the researcher to closely analyze interactions and link them across time (Blommaert, Collins, Heller, Rampton, Slembrouck, & Verschueren, 2003).

“Experience-near” research provides researchers with direct contact to the artifacts that surround organizational participants (Kohut, 1977; Rasche & Chia, 2009). As researchers observe and participate in the cultures that they study, interactions with the subject help create a narrative from which data is drawn. Interactions with cultural participants (organizational members) also provide a context in which confirmation or rejection, and ultimately consensual validation of the cultural story is obtained.
The Paradox

The paradox of participant-observation is inherent in the simultaneous engagement with participation and observation as a requirement of fieldwork—our notion of having one foot inside the organization, and one foot outside of the organization. As an “invited intruder” or “professional stranger,” the researcher may find it challenging to remain in the role of observer with the often persistent emotional pressure to abandon this intrusive role. Participant observers face demands, explicit and implicit, internal and external, to step outside of role. Frequently, the pressure to step outside of role comes from anxious participants engaged in unconscious collusion with researchers, blurring the boundary between self and other, researcher and research subject. These collusions often are indicative of members’ and researchers’ fears and anxieties about uncertainty, change and emotional loss, as well as members potentially having to assume responsibility for their negative as well as positive conditions and circumstances. Consequently, participant-observers may find themselves to be the target of projected aggression and hostilities, thereby having to contain toxic emotions that do not originally belong to them.

Negative capability is a concept that encapsulates this paradox. Negative capability is the facility to become a “container” for negative emotions (Bion, 1962; French, 2001). In psychoanalytic psychotherapy, therapists “stand alongside” their clients providing the support for change by helping them understand, organize, and change negative states of mind with greater self consciousness. Containment of negative emotions such as projected aggression requires a researcher to observe and participate in uncomfortable situations without reacting so that they can maintain their role of dispassionate observer. Containment here represents the researcher’s assuming the position of container for the research subject or organizational member who is the actual and original container of the projected aggression. Eventually and when the timing is right
such as in feedback sessions the researcher will have processed the emotional states of many members and will be able to articulate these previously toxic emotions in a manner that can be taken back and constructively processed by members themselves. Transference and counter-transference dynamics represent the emotional quality and myriad forms of relational dynamics between researcher and research subject, while the intersubjective third signifies the position taken up by the researcher—a position that enables one to observe patterns of self and other relations from the metaphorical vantage point of having one foot in and one foot out, participating and observing simultaneously (Ogden, 2004; Diamond and Allcorn, 2009).

Toward the Mindful Practice of Participant Observation

The ethnographic approach to studying organizations and its primary method of participant-observation is an interpretive approach that “does not fully fit into the rational model” (Vinten, 1994). Van Maanen (1988) when he speaks of "unmasking fieldwork" (pg. 92), implies that there are multiple truths and that the ethnographer can present only one; hoping that it is the most relevant. There is an assumption that the participant-observer is eventually able to see the world through the insider’s eyes, but it is unclear how this is achieved. The practice of participant-observation raises several questions for researchers: How is the inside and outside perspective developed simultaneously? How can the paradox of participant-observation be managed effectively? How can the critical skills of mindfulness and self-awareness be developed?

In general, participant-observation has been an orphaned method, lacking a guiding theory for fieldwork (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998) and sufficient emphasis on reflection to enhance insight (Yanow, 2009). In particular, the literature on participant-observation has little to say about how the critical social, psychological, and emotional skills required for effective
participant-observation are developed. We argue that participant-observation requires heightened self-consciousness and awareness. Psychodynamic and attachment theory with the added validity of brain research and neuroscience, offer clinical and practical insight into what processes are involved and need to be engaged while doing fieldwork in organizations. We now turn to a discussion of the clinical concepts that can be applied to enhance the method of participant-observation.

Psychoanalytic Literature: Exploring Unconscious Meanings

Contemporary psychoanalytic theories are premised on a relational rather than a drive model, two-person rather than one-person psychology, making this framework more insightful for understanding the relational and cooperative nature of groups and organizations. It is assumed that much of human behavior is shaped by organized experiences and perceptions, unconscious meanings and motivations, or what is called “internal object relations” (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983; Modell, 1984; Ogden, 1987). With particular relevance for considering participant-observation from a psychoanalytic perspective, concepts such as transference, counter-transference, and the intersubjective third, are particularly insightful. The notion of the intersubjective third is a more nuanced substitution for Winnicott’s concept of transitional or potential space, which as noted above requires secure and good enough holding (mothering) (Benjamin, 2004; Ogden, 2004). Psychoanalytic theory is interpretive. It thereby encourages analysts to embrace ambiguity and as a framework for interpretation rests on the influence of transference and counter-transference (Daniel, 2006; Hoffman, 2009). The power of counter-transference is critical to the notion of using one-self as an instrument of research and observation of self and other (as in participant-observation).
In that spirit, psychoanalytically informed organizational studies attend to the internal lives of organizational participants’ thoughts, feelings, and motivations (Diamond & Allcorn, 2003). Psychoanalysis informs organizational research by examining the underlying motivations of individual behavior and in particular relational psychodynamics. In contemporary psychoanalytic thinking, the interpretation of human motivations come from better understanding of individual (relational) experiences and perceptions—a view in symmetry with paying attention to attachment behavior and the psychodynamics of transference and countertransference. We observe relationships and then attempt to interpret what is going on by analyzing what participants say and do in practice and by latent and manifest content of their collective organizational story.

A primary task of the psychoanalytically-informed research practitioner is to construct a psychological space (a holding environment) where unconscious meanings, emotions, and motives can be heard, observed, and reflected on in the participant-observer, researcher and research subject, dyad. The concept of the intersubjective third signifies the point at which emotional contact and consensual validation is arrived at between two or more human beings. The value of this concept is in its describing a position we take up as researchers or consultants to organizations. This position sharpens our focus and observations on the area of intersubjectivity between ourselves and others, and between and among participants in groups and organizations.

As two or more people work together to gain a deeper understanding of the context that they work together in, thirdness will emerge (Diamond, 2007). From the location of the analytic, intersubjective third, we interpret and better understand transference dynamics, which occur when individuals displace from oneself to another, feelings and perceptions shaped by their past
experiences and triggered in the present moment (Diamond & Allcorn, 2003). In organizations, members transfer positive and negative feelings onto leaders (executives and managers) often around issues of power and authority, which are frequently associated with emotions of dependency, aggression, and affection. Moreover, researchers engage in counter-transference toward and in reaction to organizational members as research subjects. Feelings triggered may be in the present moment but are shaped by the past. It is the researcher’s self and other awareness of this phenomenon that matters in enabling him or her to better interpret and think through what is going on in the moment. In organizations, emotions are shared between leaders and managers and workers, or between researchers and organizational participants.

Using the notion of self as an instrument of research requires that participant-observers are relatively conscious of their own emotional reactions to the organizational culture in which they are immersed, and simultaneously aware of the emotional states of organizational participants to their work environments. To say that effective participant-observation demands enhanced self-awareness means that researchers ought to have the capacity to achieve a realistic assessment of their own nature, and ability to be “natural” with cultural participants (Wolcott, 1995).

Participant-observation is almost completely reliant on the personal attributes of the researchers (Cassell & Symon, 1994). Enhanced self awareness allows the researcher to lessen the impact of bias on the data and ethical choices; providing a mechanism for counter-transference to become a tool of research rather than an obstacle. In particular, the researcher’s self-awareness becomes a means for interpreting transference and counter-transference that occur between the organizational fieldworkers and organization members, and among organization members and groups (Diamond & Allcorn, 2003). Participant-observation has several
commonalities with psychoanalytic techniques. For instance, psychoanalytic observation requires attention to relational and experiential patterns and themes as well as points of urgency as articulated by members in interviews and observations of performance of tasks. Thus, psychoanalytic theory provides a frame that can be used to organize and interpret experiential and behavioral data gathered by participant-observers, helping to “adjust the microscope” (Bachrach, 1989). We now discuss attachment theory as an extension of both psychoanalytic and neuroscience theory and an additional dimension for understanding and enhancing the methodology of participant-observation.

Attachment Research: Bridging the Gap between Brain and Mind

Fonagy (2001) notes similarities between psychoanalytic and attachment theories. The first is the notion that perceptions and experiences are shaped by internal interpretive frameworks established by early experiences with caregivers. Attachment and psychoanalytic theories assume that the early years are a template for intimacy, cognitive, and emotional development throughout the lifespan. Second, attachment occurs through the mirroring and “good enough mothering” (Bowlby, 1987; 1988; Mahler, Pine, Bergman, 1975; Kohut, 1977; Winnicott, 1971) between infant and primary caregiver. This original and primary narcissistic state during infancy and early childhood shapes the quality of adult transference and counter-transference phenomena in clinical and organizational settings. Third, object-seeking is a fundamental human motivation, which is influenced by early attachments where experiences are organized into perceptions and meanings emerge in the context of significant relationships. Transitional objects and potential space both essential for healthy separation, individuation, creativity and change, emerge out of stable attachments and “good enough mothering” (Winnicott, 1971).
The individual capacity for collaborative and reflective dialogue is possible later in adulthood and within organizations as a consequence of healthy attachments. Moreover, health attachments provide the facility for individuals to engage in what psychoanalysts call “thirdness”—a conscious awareness of the dialectical nature of self and other relations (intersubjectivity). This self-consciousness of the human pair is similar to what Fonagy and his associates call “mentalization” rooted in firm and well-established attachment patterns in infancy. Akin to Kohut’s (1977) emphasis on empathy and introspection, mentalization is “preconscious imaginative mental activity” that allows us to interpret others’ intentions and feelings (Jurist, Slade, & Bergner, 2008). “The same kind of imaginative leap can be required to understand one’s own mental experience, particularly in relation to emotionally charged issues or irrational (perhaps unconsciously driven) reactions” (Jurist, Slade, & Bergner, 2008).

In contrast, trauma or disorganized, anxious attachments of infancy are believed to provoke primitive defensive and pathological cognitive and emotional processes manifested in psychological splitting and projective identification, which produces “negative” transferences that interfere with empathy and mutual understanding. Such splitting and projective actions are the root of black and white, all or nothing, thinking, prejudice, scapegoating and violence. Consequently, the individual’s ability to engage in self-reflection and collaborative dialogue with others, including adult others in organizations and elsewhere may be damaged and compromised. Impairments in self-regulation can be seen in the experience of individuals with unresolved trauma or grief (Siegel, 2001).

Attachment can be understood as the need for physical closeness that is expressed as distress during separation and joy at reunion. This effect was demonstrated by Harry Harlow in his experiments with Rhesus monkeys between 1957 and 1963. Infant monkeys clinging to artificial
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terycloth mothers after a three day separation. Harlow’s studies demonstrated that intimacy and love are the important aspects of the mother-child relationship. An attachment relationship becomes the “base” from which an individual operates and a “safe haven” in times of distress (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969; Daniel, 2006). The first significant attachment relationships are with primary caregivers but later in life romantic partners become important attachment relationships (Ainsworth, 1989; Daniel, 2006).

The implication is that there is a potential for attachment behaviors to emerge in the organizational context where adults spend a majority of their time. As individuals become adults, attachment behaviors become a feature of their individual psychology rather than their relationships (Bowlby, 1973; Daniel, 2006) and these patterns are unconscious. However, we can expect to see these characteristics emerge in social contexts because they are a part of the frameworks that individuals apply to interpret and respond to the world. An important aspect of attachment is the notion that capacity for “reflection” is closely related to attachment patterns during development (Daniel, 2006; Fonagy & Target, 1997). Secure attachments matter in their affect on organizational behavior and in particular on dimensions of hope, trust, burnout, and performance (Simmons, Gooty, Nelson, and Little, 2009). Based on these stable and secure attachments, the extent to which individuals are reflective will impact their functioning and performance in organizations and in their ability to engage in organizational change initiatives.

Attachment research has demonstrated that interpersonal experiences shape psychological and emotional development, and internal representations of the world. This explains something about organizational participants and also tells us that the extent to which researchers can engage emotionally with organizational participants determines their ability to observe and interpret their experiences.
Early neural representations likely become the templates upon which individuals construct their reality (Daniel, 2006). This might indicate that human minds respond conditionally to current environments based on how their developmental environments shaped the development of their brain. We turn now to a brief discussion of recent neuroscience research that is relevant to developing the skills of participant-observers.

A Brief Review of Recent Neuroscience Research

As participant observers, the most useful research tool available is the mind itself. “It is the mind that takes in what is seen and heard, registers feelings in the observer and others, and processes what has been observed” (Skogstad, 2004). Neuroimaging provides a tangible representation of the mental processes at the heart of psychoanalysis and the data for psychoanalytic observation (Skogstad, 2004). Likewise they represent one aspect of the behaviors observed during participant-observation, and the state of the participant-observer.

Brain research has focused on a number of mental states including beliefs (Aichhorn et al., 2008), creativity (Bengtsson, Csikszentmihalyi, & Ullen, 2007), empathy, attention demanding tasks, and self-referential tasks (Jackson, Meltzoff, & Decety, 2005). Sense of self and the ability to engage others in collaborative communication are mediated by the prefrontal areas of the brain (Siegel, 2001). Taken together, these mental capabilities are called mentalization (Fonagy, 2001).

“Mentalization is a specific symbolic function that is central to both psychoanalytic and attachment theory and that emerged concurrently in psychoanalytic and attachment theory thinking. Developmentalists have drawn our attention to the universal and remarkable capacity of young children to interpret the behavior of themselves, as well as others, in terms of putative mental states. Reflective function enables children to conceive of other’s beliefs, feelings, attitudes, desires, hopes, knowledge, imagination, pretense, plans, and so on. At the same time as making others’ behavior meaningful and predictable, they are
also able flexibly to activate from multiple sets of self-other representations the one most appropriate in a particular interpersonal context” (Fonagy, 2001: 165).

These cognitive and emotional competencies are critical in our view of participant-observation. The representational system that is required for mentalization commonly involves four specific areas of the brain (Frith, 2007): the paracingulate area, tempro-parietal junction, amygdala, and the temporal poles. These areas seem to regulate beliefs and inferences, interpretations of body language (Pelphrey, Morris, & McCarthy, 2005), understanding facial expressions, and negotiating interpersonal interactions (Jurist, Slade, & Bergner, 2008). These areas of the brain are also implicated in the ability to remember the past and imagine the future “suggesting the existence of a common set of cognitive processes devoted to projecting oneself into worlds that differ mentally, temporally or physically from one’s current experience” (Mitchell, 2009).

The concept of neuroplasticity has particular relevance for enhancing participant-observation. The theory of neuroplasticity tells us that social experiences and environmental factors can change the physical structure of the brain, altering cognition, behavior, and emotions. These changes occur through creation of new neural connections, “pruning” of existing connections, or even growth of new neurons (Munte, Altenmuller, & Jacke, 2002).

Effective participant-observation requires many of the skills that have been associated with specific areas of brain activation. Neuroscience enhances our understanding of how intensive interventions impact individuals and the nature of change. Brain structure is an aspect of mindfulness, and the development of enhanced awareness (neuroplasticity). There is some evidence that the skills needed for participant observation are biologically based and can be developed. This could be a mechanism to develop the skills of participant-observation.
However, it is not our intent to reduce the skills of participant-observers to brain activity. Gaps between neuroscience research and important mental processes do exist, particularly with regard to counter-transference (Vivona, 2009). Although there is some evidence that specific brain areas generate the self-reflective parts of the mind, there is also evidence that suggests that self awareness is actually a “collection of distinct mental operations distributed throughout the brain, rather than a unitary cognitive system” (Powell, Macrae, Cloutier, Metcalfe, & Mitchell, 2009). It is our intent to provide additional insight into the study of humans and knowledge of ourselves as researchers engaged in fieldwork as participant-observers. A “mixed-model” that is informed by the advances of neuroscience without foregoing the insights achieved by mindfulness and creative interpretation is an ideal approach to studying organizations (Warme, 1982; Rosen, 1991).

A New Perspective on Participant-Observation

Organizational researchers who apply the methodology of participant-observation are active observers; mindful, curious, attentive, imaginative, and reflective. But they are also participants or co-participants with organizational members to the extent required to observe the most meaningful aspects of organizational life. Neuroscience, including attachment theory, and psychoanalytic theory can inform researchers about how to deepen the experience of participant-observation in order to better describe and more fully understand the culture. Understanding the brain responses that correlate to states of mind, emotional reactions, and attributions provides a tangible dimension to the experiences and interpretations of participant-observers. Despite the shortcomings of the neurosciences, they offer us a set of tools that allow awareness about reactions to individuals and cultural contexts, and anticipation of the types of behaviors that cultural participants will exhibit. For example, impairments in self-regulation, neurobiologically
and psychologically, can be seen within the minds of those individuals with unresolved trauma or grief (Siegel, 2001).

Of course, it is not likely nor do we propose that brain imaging become a tool of organizational research. Yet, there is much we can learn from brain research that corroborates attachment and psychoanalytic theories. Attachment and relational (internal object relational) patterns are the implicit, unconscious influences on individuals. The implicit attachment patterns of organizational participants may influence how they respond to researchers as well as colleagues. Connection with a researcher (ethnographer/participant-observer) may provide an important mechanism for organizational participants to attend to and regulate their own responses to the environmental processes (Siegel 2001). Transference and counter-transference dynamics (Daniel, 2006) are important data from which researchers can then infer about the relational dynamics around them. Recognizing that behavior inside organizations is shaped by individual unconscious processes, and that these processes contribute to group level unconscious dynamics, suggests that researchers look beyond the manifest surface features of the organization and pay attention to relational patterns.

Interpretation is critical to the psychoanalytic approach: a framework from which the researcher analyzes relational dynamics through the lens of transference and counter-transference and a consciousness of self and others. This approach means paying attention to defensive and adaptive responses of individuals and organizations to anxiety and uncertainty surrounding attachments and interdependencies. When attachment is understood as a malleable feature of individual psychology during social interactions, it suggests that organizational researchers (fieldworkers, ethnographers, participant-observers) have a greater potential impact on organizational activities than previously appreciated. That is, these researchers through intensive
interactions and longer term relationships may very well influence the individual neuropsychology as well as the relational patterns and organizational culture, thereby enhancing the potential for influencing change. These changes in the internal mental models of attachment may be mediated by continuing openness of the brain to change in response to experience. Thus, the possibility remains that ongoing experiences, especially those involving the basic aspects of secure attachments described earlier, may enable some individuals to acquire a more richly developed capacity for neural integration (Siegel, 2001). This means that our participation in an organization can have a significant impact on the organizational participants.

The participant-observer is simultaneously an outsider and an internal representation that becomes part of the organizational construct (Armstrong, 2010). As such, transference, counter-transference, and transitional and potential space are relevant concepts provided by psychoanalytic theory because the character and quality of relational dynamics between researcher and research subject, organizational leaders and followers, matters. Yet, these conjectures of researcher influence come with ethical responsibilities and dilemmas. There is a fine line of distinction between educating participants on the content of their organizational culture so that they have the knowledge to shape change themselves, in contrast with engineering change on their behalf. The former is more consistent with the ethic of the three paradigms while the latter is contrary to that ethic of promoting consciousness, free will, and intentionality.

The ethnographic approach to studying organizations, utilizing the participant-observation method, has as its principle aim a plausible depiction of the organizational culture under study. The researcher records the thoughts and actions of organizational members in a way that is understandable to the outsider, "representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one's own experience" (Van Maanen, 1988; pg ix). "The accumulation of
ethnographies indicates and enhances an enduring domain of human discourse more than it signals any advance in our formal understanding" (pg x). The ethnographic method of organizational analysis is largely interpretive with the meaning emerging from the details observed and recorded by researchers. Theoretical frameworks applied to identify and interpret qualitative data collected by participant-observers are frequently drawn from multiple disciplines. We suggest a new perspective of participant-observation as a method for gathering data that is analyzed and interpreted with the insights of various psychological and neuropsychological theories and with the intentional self-reflection of researchers.

Conclusion

The neurosciences, attachment theory, and psychoanalytic theory have the potential to increase the utility of participant-observation in studying organizations. Table 1, pg. 23, summarizes the links between the three paradigms discussed in this article and the methodology of participant-observation. They provide useful concepts framing the experiences of participant-observers as they interact with organizational members, and resolving the paradox of being an “invited intruder.” They also provide use with concepts that inform us how to develop the skills that are critical to effective participant-observation. Integrating the method of participant-observation with specific theoretical frames enhances its utility and contribution to a greater understanding of organizations.

Organizations represent unique cultural situations that create specific challenges for participant-observers. According to Schein (2010), organizational culture lives and breathes at three levels of analysis: 1) artifacts, 2) espoused values, and 3) basic assumptions. Artifacts are located at the manifest level and are symbolic of certain peculiar features of organizational culture, while espoused values represent individuals articulated philosophies of work and
organization often at odds with actual practices. Basic assumptions are typically latent features of organizational culture and are observed and interpreted characteristics of personality, defensive routines, assumptions about motivating people and the human condition, assumptions of time and space, and the like. Organizational culture itself is taken for granted by members and thereby suppressed and rendered unconscious over time.

Participant-observation, particularly when taken from a psychoanalytic orientation, is intended to make conscious the otherwise repressed and latent material of organizational culture. For some scholars, organizational cultures are governed by belief systems or ideologies, while for others organizations are simply pragmatic and rational. Organizations are cultures with a specialized set of rules, goals, and strategies, which are likely congruent with general culture; circular nature of rules and interpretation (Rosen, 1991). From our perspective organizational cultures are much more than these manifest dimensions of rationally organized systems. They are in fact not simply rational and strategic; rather they are also irrational and emotional. What qualifies for some as rational decision making and strategizing, is also driven by the shared emotions of transference and a cognitive unawareness reflective of ritual and routine.

Originally developed as a systematic and scientific method for studying and comparing cultures, participant-observation is often viewed as too interpretive or constructionist to be of use in producing broad knowledge about the problem explored by the research. The advantage of participant-observation is a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of organizational life. Its attention to detail amplifies diagnostic description of the organization giving it greater sensitivity to patterns that might otherwise go undetected.

Participant-observation is a good method for studying reflexive human subjects in groups and organizations. Ethnography and participant-observation have relevance to organizations
when they are defined as social constructs, and participant-observation is regarded as a method that is best suited to understanding the shared meanings of individuals in an organization.

Ethnography is an active process where change and reinterpretation are ongoing. It involves self-awareness, and awareness of how the self changes in interactions with others. Participant-observation as a methodology can take advantage of the convergence between the neurological and social sciences. Attachment theory, as it pertains to adult relationships, is also useful for understanding the impact of close, interpersonal relationships of all sorts. The concept of neuroplasticity makes the findings of brain research, psychoanalysis, and attachment studies relevant by framing what we already know from clinical and observational research in a way that provides a mechanism for change. We understand that we can act in such a way as to change the neurobiology that underlies self awareness, and pay attention to how our interactions with others affect their neurology. Mirror neurons observed in brain imaging provide evidence for the capacity to change and reach consensual validation with deeper understanding and empathy (Iacoboni, 2009).

Because we know that implicit memories can influence current behavior without our knowledge (Siegel, 2001; Kandel, 2006) self awareness becomes a key aspect of preparing for field work. The deepest sense of self awareness, of core consciousness, may be profoundly influenced by early experiences in infancy even before explicit, memory is available. (Siegel, 2001). This neurological view of the creation of a core self experience may help us to understand the profound importance of collaborative, contingent communication in the development of the infant, and perhaps normal functioning throughout the lifespan (Siegel, 2001). Attentiveness to transference and counter-transference dynamics between organizational researchers and organizational participants, and thereby the nature and quality of attachment behavior within
organizations themselves, may prove to proffer greater depth of understanding organizational cultures and their human inhabitants.

Neuroscience findings seem to support the notion of “neuroplasticity” and the Buddhist practices and philosophy of “mindfulness” as well as the notion of what we might call “the observing ego” or in contemporary psychoanalytic literature the notion of the “third,” “thirdness,” and the “analytic third,” in which the sense of “me” rises above the notion of “I” and observes emotional experiences and processes with sufficient (adequate, good enough) distance (some might say objectivity) to consider and interpret emotions without getting embroiled and overtaken by the need to react to the same emotions. This enhanced observational quality is derived from heightened consciousness and awareness of previously unconscious (unthought known, prereflectively unconscious) dynamics. It is this awareness that allows the participant-observer to effectively manage the paradox of participant-observation.
Table 1: How Key Concepts from the Three Paradigms Enhance Participant-Observation

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<td>2. Transference / counter-transference.</td>
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<td>2. Brain responsiveness to social and physical environments.</td>
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<td>Key Aspects</td>
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<td>Questions</td>
<td>1. How do we simultaneously develop an inside and outside perspective?</td>
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<td>Raised by PO</td>
<td>2. How do we develop the critical skills of participant-observation?</td>
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<td>3. What is the implication for understanding organizations?</td>
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<td>Enhancement</td>
<td>1. Transference and countertransference help us better understand the experiences of “insiders,” keeping one foot in.</td>
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<td>of PO</td>
<td>2. Negative capability is a concept that helps us understand how to observe without reacting, keeping one foot out.</td>
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<td>3. Attachment patterns may help explain the ability of the researcher to engage with organizational participants.</td>
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<td>5. Neuroplasticity provides us with a way to understand how researchers develop the skills of PO.</td>
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Bibliography


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i “Researcher” is a role that covers fieldworkers in organizational ethnography and action researchers in a qualitative organizational methodology. The latter is important as cover for the notion of intervention that follows organizational depiction, narrative, story or organizational diagnosis/assessment.

ii Participant-observation is a naturalistic research method that immerses a researcher in a ‘foreign culture.’ Fieldwork is the process of doing participant-observation. Ethnography is the written story of the culture that emerges from the fieldwork.

iii See W.R. Bion’s notion of container and contained for a fuller description and definition of containment and the psychodynamics of “negative capability.”

iv The intersubjective or analytic third refers to the pair of researcher/participant observer and research subject/organizational member. The concept of the third signifies the intersubjective character and relational dynamics produced and constructed by the dyad, which is then observed and reflected upon in the practice of participant-observation.

v The mind is an emergent property of the brain that is comprised of an individual's thoughts, memories, and emotions. The mind is comprised of conscious and unconscious processes; mindfulness is the ability to be fully aware of the here and now, or the present moment.
Contemporary psychoanalytic approaches emphasize experience and the constancy of the presence of the other (therapist) that makes a difference. We might assume this relates to the notion of neuroplasticity and physical evidence of relational and psychodynamic change.