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

Carrie M. Duncan
Michael A. Diamond
University of Missouri
Harry S Truman School of Public Affairs
Center for the Study of Organizational Change

Preliminary Draft: Please Do Not Cite

Prepared for the 6th International Conference on Interdisciplinary Social Sciences
July 11-13, 2011
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 being studied via participation and to simultaneously distance themselves through observation of the artifacts, espoused values, and assumptions of the culture. Self-awareness and managing the boundary between researcher and cultural member, insider and outsider, are also critical. Key concepts such as transference and countertransference, the intersubjective third, and negative capability will be considered and applied to offer deeper understanding of how organizational researchers can mindfully apply the method of participant-observation to the study of organizations. We describe the traditional notion of participant-observation, how participant-observation is modified for use in organizations, and discuss how what we know from neuroscience, attachment, and contemporary psychoanalytic theories that might enhance and advance the use and effectiveness of participant-observation in organizational research.
One Foot In, One Foot Out: The Paradox of Participant-Observation

Participant-observation is a hallmark methodology of anthropology, sociology (Bernard, 1995), and organizational studies (Ybema, Yanow, Wels, & Karnsteeg, 2009). 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. The role of participant-observer is paradoxical in that individual researchers have to position themselves inside and outside the organization simultaneously. To fully appreciate this difficult role one requires concepts that illuminate and heighten consciousness of self and others. This is part of the tradition of participant observation but we suggest that the psychoanalytic approach can lend a deeper, richer understanding to the practice of this methodology.

The purpose of this paper is to develop a deeper and richer understanding of what it means for organizational researchers to take up the role of participant-observer in the study of organizational culture. This deeper understanding of participant-observation is discovered with the assistance of contemporary object relations theory (relational and attachment theory), which is further substantiated by the findings of neuroscience. We begin by describing the history of participant-observation as a methodology in social science and organizational studies and the traditions of its practice. We then explore concepts from contemporary object relations theory. Using these concepts we develop a new perspective on the practice of participant-observation in organizational research.
Participant-Observation

Historical Overview

Participant-observation has its roots in the “armchair anthropology” of the 1800s. Anthropologists of the time studied human cultures from a distance, using information obtained by the travels of others to make cross-cultural comparisons (Foley, 2002). In the early twentieth century the works of anthropologists such as Malinowski, Boas, and Mead led the way for a participant-observation approach to understanding culture, living in far away cultures for long periods of time and experiencing their culture first hand (Foley, 2002). Distinct forms of the ethnographic approach, of which the primary method is participant-observation, emerged in Europe and America. The former focused on relationships among roles and social institutions, while the latter focused on symbols as an expression of how people understand their world (Foley, 2002). By the 1960s systematic approaches to participant-observation and ethnography were emerging in Chicago with the work of scholars such as Becker, Bruyn, Geer, and Goffman, and at Stanford with the work of Wolcott in elementary schools (Foley, 2002; Smith, 1978). These schools of thought developed participant-observation as a methodology that was interpretive, constructivist, and experiential.

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). However a debate did emerge that polarized the social sciences and split the method between two general perspectives: objectivity and subjectivity. Anthropologists have characterized this dichotomy in a variety ways: developing the insider’s (emic) and outsider’s (etic) understanding, “first person versus third person, phenomenological versus objective, and cognitive versus behavioral theories” (Geertz, 1983; Lee, 1991).
Reflexivity, “a crisis of truth,” was a response to this debate, dissolving the dichotomy between the subjective and the objective by taking a constructionist view of social reality and suggesting that the values and emotions of the researcher, along with observation of cultural members, is a better way to capture “the complex, interactional, and emergent nature of social experience” (Cunliffe, 2003). In particular, the reflexive anthropology of the 1970s situates the researcher as “non-exploitative and compassionate towards the research subjects” (Pillow, 2003). The call for reflexivity answered the question of how to represent the researcher and the researched in qualitative research and participant-observation by incorporating the researcher into the social reality being studied. In particular, reflexivity drew attention to the relationship between both an “other” and a conscious awareness of the self in relation to that other (Pillow, 2003).

Reflexive participant-observation is based in one of two metaphors: otherness or betweeness (Cunliffe, 2003). “Betweeness” rises from American style cultural anthropology and incorporates a constructionist understanding of social reality, including language as constitutive of social and organizational reality, and recognition of the intersubjective nature of “objective” reality (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Cunliffe, 2003). From this perspective, as an active participant in the co-construction of social reality, participant-observers recognize how their own values and beliefs impact their inquiry (Cunliffe, 2003; 1970; Pillow, 2003). This approach is paradoxical in that it requires the participant-observer to become immersed in the social reality of the observed, taking note of personal experience, and at the same time avoid lapsing into self-obsessed, confessionalist reports that focus more on the researcher than the culture being observed (Cunliffe, 2003; Pillow, 2003; Van Maanen, 1988).
The literature on participant-observation has little to say about the critical social, psychological, and emotional skills required to simultaneously develop these perspectives. Some authors suggest that participant-observers can deepen their understanding of those being observed through empathy and identification (Sanday, 1979), however traditional approaches to participant-observation emphasize focusing on observable behaviors (Geertz, 1983). We argue that participant-observation requires heightened self-consciousness and awareness in order to dissolve these dualisms and develop a holistic perspective of the culture being studied. Contemporary psychoanalytic theory, is supported by attachment and neuroscience research, provides concepts useful for developing the self-awareness that is central to participant-observation.

**Participant-Observation Defined**

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). Claims to understand a culture are best informed by methods that collect detailed, first-hand knowledge of the nuances of daily life. Participant-observation has the potential to yield many different types of data and is the friend of the interpretivist and the positivist alike because of its utility in formulating research questions and reducing reactivity (Bernard, 1995; Lee, 1991). Data gathered by participant-observers are generally narrative descriptions based on the observations and daily experiences of the researcher. The primary goal of research using the method of participant-observation is the interpretation of human cultures (Rosen, 1991).

Simply defined, participant-observation is a naturalistic research method in which the researcher has prolonged and intense interaction with those being studied with the purpose of understanding how they interpret and assign meaning to the world around them (Becker, 1958).
Participant-observers conduct their research by immersing themselves within the social context of the people that they are trying to understand, typically for six months to several years, sharing their daily lives (Becker, 1958; Kluckhohn, 1940; Smith, 1978). 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. 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 participant-observer in the cultural context being studied also allows the researcher to closely analyze interactions and link them across time (Bernard, 1995; Blommaert, et al., 2003) and gives researchers the power to understand and explain the data that is gathered.

From a reflexive perspective, participant-observation is more than just a technique; it is a set of skills that together comprise a conscious, systematic approach to understanding (Kluckhohn, 1940). Reflexive participant-observers are awake, mindful, curious, attentive, imaginative, and reflective. In attending to the social reality that they are co-constructing with those being observed, participant-observers are always thinking creatively (Hoffman, 2009; Smith, 1978).

Participant-observation occurs on a continuum from observation only to participation only (Gold, 1958; Vinten, 1994) and 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 sociality” (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).

Participant-observers take an experiential perspective on the everyday life of cultural
participants, stepping into the role of participating observer (Bernard, 1995), a social role known both to themselves and those with whom they are participating (Lee, 1991; Kluckhohn, 1940). This role is both general, in relation to the group as whole, and specific, in relation to a specific person (Kluckhohn, 1940). In this way, participant-observers are able to understand interpersonal dynamics, and how they relate to the culture of the organization.

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 Mannen, 1988; Wolcott, 1995). The intensity of interaction with cultural participants enriches the data collected by participant-observers, allowing the research to describe the “lived reality” of the insider (Lee, 1991; Smith, 1978; Ybema, Yanow, Wels & Kamsteeg, 2009) and making the covert explicit. Immersion involves the full attention of the researcher who is completely surrounded by the culture and the intricacies of the daily life of those being observed (Smith, 1978). As researchers observe and participate in the cultures that they study, interactions with the subject help create a narrative from which data is drawn (Cunliffe, 2003). Interactions with cultural participants also provide a context in which confirmation or rejection, and ultimately consensual validation of the cultural story is obtained.

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. In other words, the immersed participant observer must maintain a dispassionate, observing stance while at the same time “actively [deconstructing] borders between herself or himself and the subject” (Rosen, 1991). 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.

“Switching back and forth between the organization participant (inside) and scholarly data gatherer (outside) roles can cause confusion and conflict among the ethnographer and his or her co-workers, who are also his or her subjects. Crossing this role boundary can also cause anxiety within the ethnographer to the extent he or she has 'gone organizational', reluctant to disengage from the work process to record data for fear of wasting informants' and one's own work time ‘ (Rosen, 1991).

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. Thus, participant observers must develop specific emotional and psychological skills.

*The Participant-Observer’s Toolkit*

Although much about participant observation must be learned firsthand, some of the needed skills can be developed beforehand (Bernard, 1995). These skills include language fluency (Bernard, 1995, Naroll, 1962), explicit awareness, and memory skills. There is an
unconscious level at which many people operate, a level that people are unaware of and do not remember (Bernard, 1995). In writing the field notes participant observers often note those things that are reminders of other experiences in a “free-associational” quality (Smith, 1978). This “unconscious” quality of interpretation occurs alongside a conscious effort to assign “analytic or interpretive” meaning to what is being observed (Smith, 1978). Participant-observers must be able to attend to behaviors and thoughts, of self and others, that usually go unnoticed.

Naivety is another important skill for participant-observers (Agar, 1980; Bernard, 1995). As a reflexive strategy naivety involves setting aside a sense of knowing, maintaining curiosity, and being open to the unexpected. A related skill is “distancing,” creating a psychological distance that allows for sufficient reflection and analysis of experiential data. This aspect of participant-observation is a crucial dimensions that is too often neglected in discussions of participant-observation (Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009).

Effective participant-observation requires enhanced self-awareness, keen observation skills, and the ability to record, code, and analyze large amounts of experiential data. Students of participant-observation must be attentive to their own interaction styles, moral and ethical biases, and relational challenges. When doing fieldwork, the participant-observer must be realistic about his or her own nature and have the ability to be “natural” with cultural participants (Wolcott, 1995). Participant-observers should be aware of their personal weaknesses, strengths, and biases and carry that awareness into the field. Self-awareness is imperative to lessen the impact of bias on the data that is collected. A great strength of participant-observation is the reliance on the researcher, however this is also one of the reasons that the method is criticized, it is almost completely reliant on the personal attributes of the researcher (Cassell & Symon, 1994). Wolcott
(1995) suggests that greater awareness of bias can become a tool for the researcher to identify and correct his or her own blind spots.

The ability to generalize from the ethnography constructed by a participant-observer stems from his or her ability to answer the question of how what we learn from an individual can teach us about the culture in which they live. In the same way, organizational ethnographies that result from participant-observation must contribute to the knowledge and understanding of organizations.

Organizational Culture

Organizations are socially constructed realities that emerge and exist in the communication of organizational members (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). As organizations emerge through the negotiation of their members (McPhee & Zaug, 2009), organizational cultures are produced and reproduced (Eisenberg & Riley, 2001). From this perspective, organizational culture is at the “root” of the organization (Alvesson, 2002), naturally emerging from the interactions of its members. Sustained communication among organizational members will eventually be translated into text which endures over space and time (Keyton, 2005). This text becomes a tangible part of the organizational culture that contributes to the acculturation of new members. As a socially constructed reality, culture is an organic, emergent property of organizing (Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Weick, 1995). Schein (1996) defines organizational culture as:

“A pattern of basic assumptions – invented, discovered or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration – that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore to be taught to new
members as the correct way to perceive think and feel in relation to those problems” (pg. 89).

Culture is a deep and complex phenomenon that has a significant impact on individual behavior, illuminates what appears to be irrational behavior, and sheds light on leader-follower relationships and dynamics (Schein, 1996). According to Schein, uncovering the tacit, shared assumptions of the individuals in the culture is the key to understanding their behavior individually and collectively. Given the dynamic nature of organizational culture, the only effective way to understand cultural artifacts, observe espoused values and values in action, and begin to grasp basic assumptions is through participant-observation (Schein, 1990).

**Participant-Observation and Organizational Ethnography**

Participant-observation forms the basis of ethnographic fieldwork in organizations (Kees van der Waal). An ethnographic approach to studying and documenting organizations is magical in its ability to draw the complex from the mundane (Ybema, Yanow, Wels, & Karnsteeg, 2009). Its tradition in organizational studies dates as far back as the 1920’s with the Hawthorne studies and qualitative organizational studies conducted from the 1940s to the 1960s include Whyte (1948), Selznic (1949), Gouldner (1954), Goffman (1961), and Kaufman (1960) (Ybema et al., 2009). After a brief sojourn in more quantitative methods the qualitative approach came into vogue in the late 1970s again with the work of authors like Van Maanen (Ybema, Yanow, Wels, & Karnsteeg, 2009).

Organizational ethnography is distinct from historical ethnographic approaches because it occurs in a smaller environment where even the smallest ripple created by the researcher can have instantaneous and long-lasting impacts. The participant-observer within organizations is also likely studying those who are not only close in proximity, but also a part of the researcher’s
own host culture (Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009). The “ethnographically inclined organizational researcher” must be concerned with the unique challenges presented by studying the exotic nature of their own culture, “claiming sufficient bravado to transform that which is culturally familiar into a subject upon which to interpret understandings” (Bernard, 1995; Rosen, 1991). In addition, organizational members are more likely to become a part of the construction and consumption of the ethnography (Ybema et al., 2009). In the case of organizational research “culture” is but a microcosm within a larger cultural context (Rosen, 1991). Organizational participant-observers are also more apt to focus on a particular role, process, or level within the organization rather than the organizational culture as a whole (Ybema et al., 2009). Given the smaller context and the nature of organizational life, immersion in the organization may be fragmented (van der Waal, 2009).

Organizational culture is “rough-edged” and ambiguous (Rosen, 1991; Van Mannen, 1988). Participant-observation, perhaps synonymous with what Ybema et al. (2009) call “ethnographying,” employs multiple methods of interaction and observation of organizational life that sets it apart from other research approaches (Ybema et al., 2009). Members of an organization are consciously organizing around a specific purpose (Rosen, 1991). “The aim of social constructionist research is then to understand how members of a social group, through their participation in social process, enact their particular realities and endow them with meaning” (Rosen, 1991).

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). Lee (1991) describes two distinct approaches to studying organizations that can be described as objective versus subjective, nomothetic versus idiographic, or
quantitative versus qualitative. The tension between these approaches to studying organizations is characteristic of the paradox of participant-observation and suggests that a reflexive perspective may be helpful for managing the paradox. Organizational participant-observers run the risk of becoming so enmeshed in their surroundings that they fail to see the things are noteworthy (Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009). At the same time, there is an assumption that the participant-observer is eventually able to see the world through the insider’s eyes, what Ybema (2009) calls “thinking from within,” but traditional approaches to participant-observation do not provide a clear explanation as to how participant-observers can “think from within” without stepping out of role. By incorporating distancing and immersion into an approach to participant-observation and acknowledging the emotional and psychological discomfort brought about by managing this paradoxical stance, participant-observation becomes reflexive (Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009). We argue that contemporary psychoanalytic theory can provide concepts that inform this reflexive strategy, enabling participant-observations to maintain the paradox of being both an insider and an outsider, and begin to use the paradox as a tool for learning.

Psychoanalytic Literature: Exploring Unconscious Meanings

Contemporary psychoanalytic theories are premised on a relational rather than a drive model, a shift from a focus on instincts, or self gratification, to a focus on relationships as the unit of analysis (Diamond, 2007; Mitchell, 2009), making this framework insightful for understanding the relational and cooperative nature of groups and organizations. In that spirit, psychoanalytically informed organizational studies attend to the internal lives of organizational participants’ thoughts, feelings, and motivations (Diamond & Allcorn, 2003). Internal lives of organizational participants are revealed through their interactions with each, their interactions with the researcher, and the researcher’s reactions to organizational members. Thus relational
dynamics provide a mechanism for “adjusting the microscope” of research (Bachrach, 1989), “zooming in” on daily practices, and “zooming out” to investigate relationships (Nicolini, 2009).

The psychoanalytic perspective assumes 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). Object relations theory describes the process whereby early experiences are internalized and later projected into social experiences.

With particular relevance for considering participant-observation from a psychoanalytic perspective, concepts such as transference, counter-transference, and the intersubjective third, are particularly insightful. Psychoanalytic theory emphasizes the influence of transference and counter-transference as a framework for interpretation (Daniel, 2006; Hoffman, 2009).

Transference represents the unconscious repetition of behavior through patterns over time. Observation of transference patterns is the method for observing the unconscious (Paul, 1989). As participant-observers observe repetition in the behaviors of organizational members, they have the opportunity to observe the implicit assumptions and core values of the culture (Schein, 2010) and make them explicit.

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 reflexive participant-observation). Attending to one’s own feelings and experiences while in role as a participant-observer is a reflexive strategy that allows the researcher to experience cultural others in a “vulnerable, emotional, embodied manner” and yet reflect on that experience in such a way as to regard self as “other” (Babcock; Foley, 2002). In other words, it provides a framework for understanding how a researcher develops both an “insider’s” and “outsider’s” perspective.
The notion of the intersubjective third is a more nuanced substitution for Winnicott’s concept of transitional or potential space (Benjamin, 2004; Diamond, 2006; Ogden, 2004). The intersubjective third refers to the pair, participant-observer and 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. Thirdness is the ability to take an outsider’s perspective on the cultural form being observed. “Paradoxically, we are able to understand and describe the field from the inside out only if we approach it, in some way or another from the outside in” (pg. 107) (Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009). Organizational researchers may either take up thirdness as a position, i.e. positioning themselves as an outside observer, or work with organizational members to develop an outside perspective, i.e. participating or co-participating in the construction of social perceptions.

Attachment and psychoanalytic theories assume that the early years are a template for intimacy, cognitive, and emotional development throughout the lifespan. An attachment relationship becomes the “base” from which an individual operates and a “safe haven” in times of distress (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969/1997; 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, 1973/1998; 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). The individual capacity for collaborative and reflective dialogue is possible later in adulthood and within organizations as a consequence of healthy attachments. 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. Moreover, healthy 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).

Psychoanalysis informs organizational research by examining the underlying motivations of individual behavior and in particular relational psychodynamics. 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 (Fonagy, 2001). 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. What we examine are the narratives, images, language, and metaphor to reveal more of the "the rest of the story" (Stein, 2005).

This approach enhances the participant-observation method by focusing fieldwork on the observation of relational aspects of organizational life and how those aspects create the organizational culture. 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 (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. Participant-observers ought to be aware of their own reactions to organizational culture, and simultaneously to those distinctive behaviors of organizational participants.

A New Perspective on Participant-Observation

“The similarities between the ethnographic interview and the analytic session or diagnostic interview have led some anthropologists to recommend the clinical method as the most appropriate aspect of psychoanalysis to be exploited by anthropologists” (Paul, 1989).
Psychoanalytic participant-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. It is assumed that people are often unaware of what they say and what they do (Hunt, 1989), thus, psychoanalytic theory provides a frame that can be used to organize and interpret experiential and behavioral data gathered by participant observers. Interpretation\(^v\) 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 (Diamond & Allcorn, 2003; Hunt, 1989). 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.\(^vi\)

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.\(^vii\) Paul (1989) reviews a number of studies using psychoanalytic participant-observation to observe transference, countertransference, and object relations. Psychoanalytic concepts provide a reflexive framework that allows researchers to better understand the social reality of cultural members. It is likely that the participant-observer
will experience anxiety at the beginning of the fieldwork (van der Waal, 2009). Elsewhere participant-observers are encouraged to experience and reflect upon their own anxieties in the context of their research experiences in order to develop “empathic understanding” (Paul, 1989).

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). 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. 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).

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.

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 our conception of participant-observation while the latter is contrary to that ethic of promoting consciousness, free will, and intentionality.

A primary task of the psychoanalytically-informed participant-observer is to construct a psychological space (a holding environment) where unconscious meanings, emotions, and motives can be heard, observed, and reflected on in the 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. 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, 2007; Diamond and Allcorn, 2009).

Negative capability is a concept that is useful for understanding how this paradox can be maintained and managed. Negative capability is the ability to set aside a sense of knowing and be open to learning, be open to and tolerate ambiguity, and to become a “container” for negative emotions (Bion, 1962; Diamond, 2003; French, 2001; Keats, 1817; Stein, 2007). 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 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. ix

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 Mannen, 1988; pg ix).

Conclusion

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. However, the advantage of participant-observation is a “thick description” 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.

Participant-observation 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 other affect their neurology. Findings of mirror neurons in brain imaging provide evidence for the capacity to change and reach consensual validation with deeper understanding and empathy.

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 dyad of 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” as well as the notion of what we might call “the observing ego” or in more contemporary psychoanalytic literature the notion of the third, thirdness, and the analytic third, in which the “me” rises above the “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 re-act 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.

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i 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).

ii Early neural representations likely become the templates upon which individuals construct their reality (Daniel, 2006).

iii For authors such as Devereux, deMause, and Stein anxiety is viewed as being rooted in poor attachment (Paul, 1989).

iv Brain research has focused on a number of mental states including those involved with mentalization. These mental processes include 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. The representational system that is required for mentalization commonly involves four specific areas of the brain (Frith, 2007): the paracingulate area, temporo-parietal junction, amygdala, and the temporal poles. These areas seem to regulate beliefs and inferences, interpretations of body language (Morris, Pelphrey, & 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).

v However, 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.

vi 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).

vii 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. The neurosciences 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).

viii 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.

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


