"Participant observation provides greater informational yield as well as more detailed descriptions of workplace behaviors and group dynamics. . . . Our conclusions caution against bureaucratic and legalistic curtailments of embedded field observation."

THE BENEFITS OF BEING THERE

Evidence from the Literature on Work

DANIEL TOPE
LINDSEY JOYCE CHAMBERLAIN
MARTHA CROWLEY
RANDY HODSON
The Ohio State University

DANIEL TOPE is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of sociology at The Ohio State University. His primary interests are in politics, labor issues, and social movements. His dissertation examines how politics influences organized labor in the United States. Other current projects focus on social welfare policy and democracy in cross-national contexts.

LINDSEY JOYCE CHAMBERLAIN is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology at The Ohio State University. Her research interests include the sociology of emotions and work and family. Her dissertation research is on emotion work and stress in the workplace. She is also currently doing research on sexual harassment and consequences of job stress.

MARTHA CROWLEY is a Ph.D. candidate at The Ohio State University with an interest in stratification across a range of institutional contexts. Her dissertation addresses control and consent in the workplace.

Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, Vol. 34 No. 4, August 2005 470-493
DOI: 10.1177/0891241605276692
© 2005 Sage Publications

Other current projects concern sexual harassment, racial variation in children's economic well-being, spatial inequality in educational opportunity, and settlement patterns, employment, and poverty among Mexicans in the United States.

RANDY HODSON is a professor of sociology at The Ohio State University. His recent books include Dignity at Work *(2001),* Worlds of Work: Building an International Sociology of Work *(2002, with Daniel B. Cornfield), and* The Social Organization of Work *(3rd edition, 2001, with Teresa A. Sullivan). He is the editor of the JAI/Elsevier research annual,* Research in the Sociology of Work. *For more information see his Web site at http://www.soc.sbs.ohio-state.edu/rdh/.*

This study draws on the sociology of work to extend discussions of informational yield in ethnographic research. The authors examine the existing population of English-language workplace ethnographies and find that relative to interviews, observation and especially participant observation consistently yield more information. Participant observation provides greater informational yield as well as more detailed descriptions of workplace behaviors and group dynamics. Interviews, however, are more likely to provide information on basic organizational characteristics, such as organization size and product market conditions. The authors' findings have important implications for university institutional review boards, which have in recent years made it increasingly difficult for projects based on participant observation to receive human subjects clearance. Our conclusions caution against bureaucratic and legalistic curtailments of embedded field observation.

Keywords: *workplace ethnography; participant observation; informational yield; institutional review board; interviews*

In their seminal article on informational yield in ethnographic research, Snow, Benford, and Anderson (1986) illuminate how

AUTHORS' NOTE: The authors equally contributed to this manuscript; their names are listed randomly. We would like to thank Steve Lopez, the editor of JCE*, and three anonymous reviewers for their insightful and useful comments on an earlier draft. This article is based on work supported by the National Science Foundation Innovation and Organizational Change and Sociology Programs under grant no. 0112434. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation. Please direct all correspondence to Daniel Tope, Department of Sociology, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210; e-mail: Tope.14@osu.edu.*

role adoption by ethnographers both enables and constrains their ability to acquire particular types and amounts of information across a variety of settings. Ethnographers have a good deal of leeway in determining how they will interact with a given environment. The dominant role they adopt, it is argued, is key to gaining some types of information and potentially limiting for other types. For example, taking on the role of an "ardent activist" in a particular social movement privileges the analyst to information shielded from outsiders while simultaneously limiting access to other potentially relevant information (Snow, Benford, and Anderson 1986). We propose that not only is there a link between fieldwork roles and informational yield but that there is also an important link between research techniques and informational yield in particular contexts. We advance the discussion of informational yield by systematically examining this research outcome for workplace studies.

Scholars engaged in qualitative fieldwork typically employ participant observation, observation, and interviews, or some combination thereof. Historically, there has been a tension between researchers using embedded observation versus those preferring interviews. Becker and Geer (1970) identified participant observation as a "yardstick" against which to measure interviews and other research methods. More recently, proponents have acknowledged that participant observation is not always feasible and have embraced the less categorical claim that *where possible*, participant observation is superior to other modes of data collection (Anderson 1999; Burawoy 1998; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). Others contend that even where feasible, participant observation is not necessarily the best means by which to collect qualitative data (Lofland and Lofland 1995). Indeed, the literature on qualitative research conveys a clear consensus that, when done properly, interviews can be a source of quality data and sociological insight across a variety of substantive areas (Lofland and Lofland 1995). Concerns of efficiency and practicality often support the use of interviews (Zelditch 1982), but proponents of interviews also cite individuals' capacity to accurately convey relevant aspects of their own experience to researchers (Burgess 1982).

Missing from this debate is a systematic evaluation of varying methods' capacities to gather information on particular research topics in specific contexts. To address this void, we use data derived from the content coding of the population of book length, English-language workplace ethnographies (Hodson and Roscigno 2004; Roscigno and

Hodson 2004; Chamberlain et al. 2005). During the coding process, we were repeatedly struck by variation in richness of description by research methodology. For example, participant observers often provided detailed examples of various forms of worker resistance while an interviewer might note that such resistance was widespread without providing examples or details. This insight, enhanced by Snow, Benford, and Anderson's (1986) study of the association between fieldwork roles and informational yield, motivated the current article. We employ content coding as a tool to formally evaluate participant observation, nonparticipant observation, and interviews with respect to their ability to generate workplace data.

In recent years, university institutional review boards have become increasingly reluctant to grant human subjects clearance for qualitative research involving the sort of open protocols typical of observation, and particularly participant observation (Becker 2004; Haggerty 2004). This reluctance reflects a bureaucratic and legalistic conservatism intended to reduce the university's exposure to liability. Such decisions can, however, have a chilling effect on field research. Evaluating the informational yield of the various qualitative methodologies is particularly important in light of this institutional challenge to field research. Furthermore, it may provide evidence of value in defending qualitative research proposals.

THREE METHODS

For the purposes of the following analysis, we categorize ethnographic data gathering as participant observation, nonparticipant observation, or interview based. We identify *participant observation* as field observation involving a researcher's active participation in the research setting. This method has the capacity to generate rich description because the researcher has the greater potential to understand subtle nuances through firsthand experience. Participation is also invaluable for achieving "insider status" as someone who is trustworthy. Michael Burawoy's *Manufacturing Consent* (1979) provides an example of a workplace ethnography based on participant observation. Burawoy conducted his study while employed as a machinist in a machine shop.

We identify *nonparticipant observation* (or simply *observation*) as field observation that does not involve active participation by the researcher. Rather, the researcher is present in the setting while the activity takes place, observing what transpires and potentially talking to workers about their experiences on or off the job. Rosabeth Moss Kanter's *Men and Women of the Corporation* (1977) provides an example of nonparticipant observation. Kanter was employed as a consultant by the corporation and did not actively engage in the clerical or managerial activities she studied.

We identify *interviewing* as formal or informal "conversations with purpose" that take place primarily outside the setting of the activity being studied. Interviews may be open ended or structured, but they usually cover a specific set of topics. Worker interviews may take place in a break room, a worker's home, or in some other setting. The important distinction here is that the researcher does not have direct access to the work activity itself, except as filtered through workers' reports. Effective communication is crucial, and familiarity with the culture of informants is key to formulating meaningful questions and correctly interpreting and evaluating their statements (Burgess 1982). Edward Greenberg's *Workplace Democracy* (1986) provides an example of a workplace study based solely on interviewing workers. Greenberg identified himself as a researcher interested in studying sawmill cooperatives and interviewed workers at a number of different sawmills across the Pacific Northwest.

We should note at the onset that all three methods involve talking to workers. In participant observation, many if not most of these conversations are informal and unscripted, occurring either on the job or during breaks. Nonparticipant observation generally makes greater use of interviewing, which can be quite informal and spontaneous or more formally structured. Interview-based studies rely exclusively on interviews often scripted to some degree and are less spontaneous, even if the researcher succeeds in putting the respondent at ease and establishing good rapport.

DECIPHERING THE WORKPLACE

Workplace ethnographies, especially book-length ones, typically cover a relatively comprehensive set of workplace topics despite their

potentially unique foci, research questions, and methods. In the remainder of this section, we outline five workplace domains representing themes in the sociology of work and comprising a template of topics essential to understanding any given workplace. In the analysis section, we evaluate the informational yield of the three qualitative research methods across these domains.

BASIC ORGANIZATIONAL FEATURES

Regardless of a study's theoretical focus, a reader may expect an account of the core features of the organizational setting, such as an organization's employment size and product market circumstances. We chose three characteristics reflecting these themes. *Employment size* (Kalleberg and Van Buren 1996) is the number of employees at the site under study. Two variables reflect attributes of the firm's product market. *Product market competition* (Averitt 1968) refers to the level of competition in the firm's product market. *Product market stability* (Juravich 1985) indicates stability in demand for the firm's products.

WORKER BEHAVIORS AND ATTITUDES

Worker behaviors and attitudes are often central to qualitative workplace studies. We selected five basic behaviors and attitudes. *Organization of production* (Vallas 1987) is the view of management and the production process from the shop floor, reflecting concerns such as adequacy of supplies and efficiency of workflow. *Work avoidance/withdrawal* (Haraszti 1978) is the purposeful avoidance of work or withdrawal from work duties. *Procedure sabotage* is violation of official operating procedures. Although it may occur for many reasons, procedure sabotage is often a response to rules that are contradictory, rapidly changing, inefficient, or impossible to meet and occurs when workers are not willing to exert the extra effort needed to reconcile these demands. *Making up social activities* (Roy 1960) refers to engagement in social activities with coworkers as a diversion from work. Birthday celebrations and elaborate joking or teasing rituals are examples. Finally, *pride in work* (Kesselman 1990) signifies the level of pride workers demonstrate in their tasks. The focus of the current analysis, however, is not on workers' views of the organization of production, or on the level of pride in a given workplace per se, but on whether a

given account *provided enough information* to identify the level of pride or to identify workers' views on the organization of production. If not, then the variable was coded as missing. It is this degree of missing data that provides our initial measure of the richness of description across research methodologies.

WORK PROCESS

Another prominent theme in workplace studies is the nature of the work process. We chose four indicators to reflect basic information regarding the work process. *Autonomy* is a measure of the amount of workers' independent input in tasks. *Creativity* is the use of one's own ideas to complete one's work. *Freedom of movement* signifies workers' capacity to move about the workplace at will. Workers with none, for example, are required to ask for permission or wait for scheduled breaks to use the restroom. Finally, *physical demands of work* is an indicator of the physical strain involved in work tasks.

GROUP DYNAMICS

Workplaces are production sites drawing individuals together to achieve organizational goals. As such, group dynamics and social relations comprise a fundamental element of the work experience, one most researchers try to penetrate in their attempt to understand the nature of work. To evaluate the information yield of various methodologies for group dynamics, we select four variables. *Peer training* is the amount of informal training by other workers. *Work group cohesion* measures the extent to which workers seek each other out for social contact at work. *Discipline enforced by workers* denotes the degree to which workers enforce work standards on other employees. *Within-group conflict* refers to frequency of conflict among individuals in the same work group and may include gossip or interference.

EMPLOYEE-MANAGEMENT RELATIONS

A final theme common to workplace studies is the relationship between workers and management. We select five variables to represent various aspects of employee-management relations. *Managerial abuse* is frequency of abuse directed at employees from managers. *Conflict*

with supervisors refers to the frequency of conflict between individual employees and the supervisors overseeing their day-to-day tasks. *Organized group conflict with managers* is a group-level indicator of pervasiveness of organized resistance directed at management. It includes strikes but also less formal group-based actions, such as conspiring to undermine a supervisor's authority. Two final indicators measure positive workplace features. *Cooperation with management* signifies the degree to which employees regularly comply with management requests and whether this compliance is contingent on extra compensation, such as overtime pay. Finally, *commitment to organizational goals* refers to whether employees demonstrate commitment to the organization and to its product or service, in contrast to resistance or compliance in response to utilitarian consideration or coercion. Given norms in many workplaces against kowtowing to management, frank expression of positive practices may be as contingent on trust and rapport with the researcher as is admission of negative sentiments and behaviors. We now turn to a discussion of the selection and content coding process for the workplace ethnographies analyzed.

DATA AND METHOD

SELECTION OF CASES

Our analysis uses data derived from the systematic content coding of the existing population of book-length, English-language workplace ethnographies. Appropriate ethnographies were selected in a two-part procedure. First, the population of workplace ethnographies was identified via computer-assisted searches of archives, examination of the bibliographies of located ethnographies, and exploration of library shelves around previously identified ethnographies. The search ended when no new titles were generated for review.

The second phase of selection involved examining each book in detail. The final pool selected for coding conformed to three criteria: (1) data collection extending during a period of at least six months, (2) a focus on a single organizational setting, and (3) a focus on at least one clearly identifiable work group. The result is a set of cases with basic coverage of organizational, managerial, worker, and labor force characteristics for one work group in a distinct organization. Of the books

examined in detail, 158 met the above criteria and were retained for analysis. Twenty-six books allowed the coding of multiple cases, generating 204 cases from the 158 ethnographies. Both industrial and service settings are well represented; occupational groups include manual labor and low-end service work and a range of white-collar occupations including clerical, managerial, and professional work.

CODING THE ETHNOGRAPHIES

A team of four researchers developed the coding instrument for the ethnographies. First, a list of variables and preliminary response categories representing core concepts in the workplace literature was generated. Second, the four team members each read and coded a common selected ethnography and then met to discuss consistencies and inconsistencies in their respective codings, the retention or removal of items, and the refinement of variables, response categories, and coding protocols. This process of reading, coding, and refinement was repeated for eight selected ethnographies. The goal was to create an instrument that trained coders could complete for each of the ethnographies with maximum reliability.

Once the coding instrument was finalized, the full set of ethnographies were read and coded by the same initial team of four researchers, participants in a yearlong graduate research practicum, and additional graduate research assistants supported through a National Science Foundation grant. All coders were trained to use a common protocol. Coders worked individually, documenting their conclusions with page numbers, and then met together to review each case in detail and to resolve questions. Where coders found contradictory information for particular variables, they discussed relevant passages with the team, which determined as a group how to code the item. To evaluate the reliability of the content-coding process, 10 percent of cases were coded a second time. The average intercorrelation between codings was .79, indicating a relatively high degree of intercoder agreement.[1]

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

While most cases touch on the five domains we have identified as comprising a template of information necessary for adequately ground-

ing a workplace study, missing data are more common in some cases than in others. It is our objective to determine whether different research methods produce systematic variation in the amount and quality of data across these five domains: basic organizational features, worker behaviors and attitudes, work process, group dynamics, and employee-management relations. First, we analyze the content-coded data to evaluate patterns of present versus missing data. Second, we return to the original ethnographic narratives to evaluate whether the richness, or thickness, of description is also affected by methodology.

RESULTS

Table 1 reports the percentage of data that is present for each selected variable by research method: participant observation, nonparticipant observation, and interviewing alone. In general, the informational yield from the various methods exhibits a consistent pattern—studies incorporating observation yield more information than do those based solely on interviews. One notable exception is the tendency for interview-based studies to have the highest percentage of data present for variables measuring basic organizational features, such as organization size, competition, and product market stability. Studies based on participant observation have the highest percentages of data present for variables chosen to represent the remaining workplace domains: worker behaviors and attitudes, work process, group dynamics, and employee-management relations. Studies based on nonparticipant observation have an intermediate information yield and are much closer to participant observation than to interviews in this regard. We now turn to the second and key phase of the analysis: investigating methodological variation in richness of data across the five informational domains in workplace studies.

BASIC ORGANIZATIONAL FEATURES

As noted above, interviews are more likely than observation to successfully generate data on basic organizational attributes. Interviewers may be able to capture this organizational-level information because of their access to workers from diverse levels and divisions within the

Table 1. Information Yield by Method of Data Collection

	Participant Observation (n = *70*) %	*Nonparticipant Observation* (n = *111*) %	*Interviews Alone* (n = *23*) %
Basic organizational features			
Employment size	93	91	100
Product market competition	92	89	100
Product market stability	94	95	100
Worker behaviors and attitudes			
Organization of production	100	97	80
Procedure sabotage	80	74	45
Work avoidance or withdrawal	86	83	50
Workers make up social activities	80	68	55
Pride in work	99	94	65
Work process			
Autonomy	100	100	90
Creativity	99	97	85
Freedom of movement	100	94	70
Physical demands	99	94	80
Group dynamics			
Peer training	92	83	55
Work group cohesion	94	89	60
Discipline enforced by workers	87	80	50
Within-group conflict	96	85	60
Employee-management relations			
Managerial abuse	86	85	65
Conflict with supervisors	92	88	60
Organized group conflict with management	89	84	60
Cooperation with management	100	96	85
Commitment to organizational goals	94	88	80

NOTE: Numbers indicate the percentage of cases with data present.

organization. In contrast, observers who quickly immerse themselves into the life of a particular work group may or may not achieve a vantage point to learn such basic organizational characteristics.

Furthermore, "being there" may be less necessary to obtain and interpret these basic facts, as a researcher does not necessarily have to be immersed in a workplace to accurately capture this information. There are often reliable secondary sources, including public records and the popular press, and the information is reasonably straightforward, not requiring special knowledge of language or context to interpret. For example, in her interviews of private household work-

ers in South Africa, Cock (1989, 122) is able to clearly and concisely evaluate employment size: "in the Eastern Cape study most households employed only one domestic servant." By interviewing multiple household employees and asking each this basic question, Cock is able to accurately and confidently describe the average employment of household workers, more so than would an observer immersed in one household.

WORKER BEHAVIORS AND ATTITUDES

Although interviewers may have more access to basic organizational information, observation-based studies are more effective in obtaining information about often-subtle workplace behaviors and attitudes. Interviewers who have not observed or participated in the phenomena under study may not be able to fully comprehend the experiences of the group. Researchers may fail to recognize errors of interpretation, as well as interviewees' intentional and unintentional distortions and omissions (Becker and Geer 1970; Manning 1992).

Since observers are better situated to comprehend the culturally specific language of the group under study, they may have a better grasp of subjects' day-to-day experiences (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). They may also be better able to understand their account of events. The jargon-laden language of even unskilled work can be perplexing to the uninitiated. Aware of this, workers cannot speak as freely with an interviewer as they do with one another or with an insider, and interviewers may miss a degree of detail they potentially would have attained had they shared in the experience of work. Orr (1996), for example, was able to comprehend the problem-solving strategies of copy-machine repair largely because, having participated in the work, he understood the numeric codes indicating various machine errors. The repair workers spoke in the language of these codes and the uninitiated would have been left largely bewildered.

Insider status can facilitate comprehension of worker attitudes and subtle behaviors specific to given workplace arrangements and interactions. Researchers not present to observe nuances risk reporting only the obvious. What immersed researchers find may be more representative of actual shop-floor realities, as workers may be less guarded in ongoing real-time interactions than in subsequent reports of events. Theft, for example, is a sensitive issue to which interviewees are not

likely to admit. In working alongside emergency medical technician crews, Metz (1981) witnessed their practice of replenishing ambulance supplies from hospital stocks rather than from their own less well-financed ambulance company. The thefts are not likely to have been disclosed to interviewers, nor might their precise meaning have been revealed. From Metz's participant observation, we learn that the thefts actually suggest high levels of commitment and extra effort on the part of the crews as they struggled to keep needed supplies on hand.

Immersion in a particular workplace culture allows researchers to understand and describe behaviors that may not surface in interviews because the topic is not broached by the interviewer. Behaviors such as work avoidance are likely to remain invisible to interviewers. In contrast, a participant observer in an Australian hospital gains first-hand knowledge of such behaviors among registered nurses:

> Passive resistance is particularly evident in the actions of clinical nurses to nursing care plans. Clinical nurses did not consider nursing care plans necessary for clinical nursing perceiving them to be an added burden for already busy nurses to deal with. The nurses in the study did not believe that the nursing notes and care plans were functional and so engaged in passive resistance by either ignoring the charts, making a minimal effort to record information, or by being deliberately absent from the ward or busy with the patient just before the shift ended. (Street 1992, 228–29)

In contrast, interviews are limited to what is asked and what is told. In the following passage, the interviewee relays his suspicion that many workers in a Japanese automobile factory located in the United States are slacking and feigning injuries. But neither the interviewee nor the interviewer appear to have a firm grasp on whether workers are avoiding work, how and under what circumstances this practice is most common, or if it represents malingering or legitimate injuries:

> Klaske [a supervisor] contended that one of the hardest parts of his job is determining who is malingering and who is not. Actually, he pointed out, the medical staff makes that determination, but "it knaws [sic] on him" because he believes that some employees are overreacting, looking for the easy job, or need to tolerate a little discomfort. He thought Toyota is too unquestioning and accepting and, thus, is being taken advantage of by a few unscrupulous employees. (Besser 1996, 128)

WORK PROCESS

We also find that immersion in the workplace is important in gaining and conveying knowledge about work processes. In short, "being there" is necessary to truly understand and communicate certain job characteristics and circumstances as well as the deeper meanings workers attach to them. Much of what comprises an ongoing process may be taken for granted by those involved, making direct observation potentially quite valuable for understanding the nature of the work process. Without the shared language, meanings, and experiences associated with taking part in the work, researchers may have difficulty fully understanding what workers actually *do* on the job.

Moreover, researchers lacking awareness of work-specific language and norms risk reporting inaccuracies stemming from incomplete or misunderstood descriptions of work structures, processes, relationships, and events. Workers are not trained to observe like researchers and sometimes have difficulty providing equivalent accounts. Workers may find it difficult to convey workplace phenomena without using jargon. The experience and meaning of even elemental aspects of work, such as the physical demands of a particular job or the freedom to move around, can also be lost on those who have not personally observed or experienced them. For example, having done the work herself, an ethnographer studying female embroidery workers in India is able to communicate clearly, even gracefully, the physical challenges of skilled embroidery work:

> Chikan embroidery is not a dangerous job and it does not require strength. It is, however, demanding in other ways. Eye-strain, backache, and muscle cramps are common complaints. The embroiderer must maintain a high degree of precision and coordination in order to produce satisfactory embroidery. The thread is inclined to twist, and the increasing slipperiness of the needle as it is moistened by sweat is a nuisance. These difficulties, on top of the mental and physical concentration required to make acceptable stitches, made my own embroidery efforts proceed extremely slowly. (Wilkinson-Weber 1999, 154)

In contrast, an interview-based study of coal miners is able to convey only opaquely the demands of what is certainly difficult and physically demanding work: "the lamp-room group keeps growing as the clock sweeps toward 3:30. Most of the miners are on their forties and fifties,

with the rough, worn faces of men who have spent much of their lives doing brute work" (Vecsey 1974, 27). In this passage, much is left to the reader's imagination as it is unclear precisely what makes coal mining "brute work." Simply stating that the work is difficult tells the reader little about the work process, how the work tasks are carried out, or the impact of the physical demands on the worker.

GROUP DYNAMICS

Interviews, like surveys, are limited in their ability to study group interaction. Individual-level bias in survey and interview methodologies is difficult to overcome without direct observation of group processes. Although most employees are capable of describing to some degree the nature of social relations at work—whether workers share camaraderie and mutual support or are conflictual with, ambivalent toward, or indifferent to one another—the degree of detail available to an interviewer depends on the extent to which a worker is inclined to share such information. Researchers who are present in the workplace overcome this limitation because they have the opportunity to observe first-hand the relationships among workers and are sometimes able to discern group dynamics of which even workers themselves are not consciously aware. Kunda (1992), for example, not only observed the presence of a normative culture dictating lengthy work hours and enthusiastic effort among engineers at a high-tech firm. He also showed how this culture acted on workers throughout the day, describing workers' sundry compliance behaviors and the subtle ways in which engineers sanctioned one another in response to perceived levels of work effort. Furthermore, he revealed how workplace participants continuously regenerated and reinforced norms via their overwhelming, seemingly enthusiastic conformity and their utter failure to question in even the slightest outward manner any of the organization's normative expectations.

Similarly, observation of corporate accounting executives reveals how spatial and temporal patterns and the work process generate social distance among colleagues:

> It is rare to see partners conversing in the open space of the floors, to see partners emerge from one another's offices, or even to see them greet one another as they pass on the main floor. One rarely sees a partner lingering

> anywhere in sight. Most partners arrive at their offices before 7:00 A.M. and leave well after 6:00 P.M. unless they have business off site or at one of their "remote" offices in another city nearby. Some partners, in fact, are hardly ever seen except for the beeline they make from the elevator to their offices and back. . . . "We just don't do social activities with one another. We retreat to our own worlds whether it's at work or at home." An audit partner put the lack of interpersonal ties more bluntly: "I don't really even work with these people. Why should they be my friends?" (Morrill 1995, 150)

Morrill's direct observations in this setting reveal that long hours, private offices, remote locales, and the individualized nature of the work process create circumstances in which camaraderie makes little sense and produces a stark absence of social cohesion. This degree of detail and the complexity of the processes involved would have been difficult to discern by way of interviews conducted apart from the actual workplace.

An interview-based study also finds evidence of limited camaraderie, this time among clerks in the insurance industry. Yet there is little sense of *how* this plays out in the office, nor any indication of *why* workers do not enjoy warmer relations:

> Our interviewees are quite reserved in the matter of camaraderie; they expect cordial relations with their colleagues, but prefer that a certain distance be maintained. Eighty-five percent of them never get together with their colleagues outside of work, and the 15 percent who do seem to apologize for it. The general order of the day seems to be "every man for himself," "we see each other enough during the week." Yet when one questions them about the character of employees, they do not fail to criticize them—as well as themselves—for their coldness, their egoism, and their distant character. (Crozier 1971, 110)

The clerks in Crozier's interview-based study might have the same structural circumstances and rationale or entirely different reasons or motivations from the executives Morrill observes. Unfortunately, we learn too little about both the workers and their environment to judge.

EMPLOYEE-MANAGEMENT RELATIONS

Gaining workers' trust is particularly important for a researcher's capacity to obtain valid information on employee-manager relations.

Though the degree and consequence of such trust varies with the work setting, it is often a matter of time and repeated interaction. Given that interviewers have little time to establish mutual trust, their findings are at increased risk of contamination through incomplete, guarded, or misleading accounts by interviewees wary of full and candid disclosure. Conversely, participant observers are able to demonstrate trustworthiness over time, through various symbolic trials with coparticipants.

Collection of data on employee-manager relations, particularly bad relations, is greatly facilitated by being accepted as "one of the gang."[2] Participation in the work process alongside other workers presents an opportunity to build rapport, weaken boundaries, and foster trust. Working with others on a daily basis creates shared experiences and understandings. Information flowing between experiential comrades may be more nuanced than comparable information yielded via interview because attitudes, practices, and opinions can be easily cloaked outside of the work context. Such concealment may limit information about subversive activities directed at the organization, management, or other workers. Of course, many disgruntled workers are willing to share grievances, but their accounts may lack important contextual components that one could only know by "being there." Hence, as barriers are reduced, participant observers have greater opportunities to detect worker resistance, sentiments about management or the organization, and experiences of abuse or retaliation, as well as to discern how the broader context contributes to these outcomes.

Participating as an "office lady" in the Tokyo banking industry, a researcher built significant coworker relationships that allowed the discovery of a unique and pervasive form of conflict between managers and office ladies (OL's):

> Valentine's Day is an opportunity for some OL's to manifest a spirit of resistance. They get a chuckle out of the fact that men can be made happy by trivial boxes of chocolate. They also take delight in devising various tactics, such as giving fewer boxes, delaying the time to give, and presenting broken chocolate, to further poison their gifts to men. . . . In preparing for Valentine's Day, women often gather to discuss whether to give chocolate to a man. Just as with gossip, the holiday provides an occasion for OL's to jointly assess men. (Ogasawara 1998, 105)

The subtle yet pervasive nature of these practices is revealed through Ogasawara's own participation as an "office lady," which allowed her access to the women's gossip network.

Conversely, persons appearing in the workplace as something other than a coworker can arouse immediate suspicion. Nonparticipant ethnographers repeatedly relate queries from workers regarding their purpose in the work setting and whether they will report what they find to management. In her interview-based study of automobile workers, Milkman (1997) reports that workers are initially wary of the researchers' intentions and regard interviews with suspicion and fear, noting that "workers' worries about our true purposes inevitably influenced their responses" (p. 195). Work contexts as arenas of greatly divergent power and potential punitive consequences make it unlikely that an untested interviewer will consistently elicit candid responses from research subjects, particularly with regard to sensitive topics. Interviewers may thus be limited in the degree to which they collect reliable information about employee-management relationships. For example, an interview-based study of a U.S. multinational corporation operating in Scotland yields a narrow and scripted account of workplace discord:

> The managing director stressed that they spent up to 80 percent of their time on "man-management" issues and they had to adopt an open and participative style in dealing with the work-force. The reason Comco had a secure and happy atmosphere, he added, was due to the legitimacy people accorded to their supervisors and managers. (Cressey 1985, 42)

One would expect management to suggest that workplace conflict is minimal or nonexistent and that managerial legitimacy is high—and this is precisely what Cressey "finds" in his interviews with managers. It is important to note here that this is the text's best indication of the degree of employee-management conflict. Thus, the reader, like the interviewer, is reliant on a standard managerial line rather than a dynamic, grounded account of workplace relations.

Because interviewers are not able to spend as much time with each respondent as observers, it is more difficult to establish a solid foundation for not only subjects' trust in the researcher's intent but also for the researcher's own trust in what the respondent has to say. The observer may thus be better able both to interpret respondents' reports and to evaluate their credibility and validity. Because observers are immersed in the setting and the situation, they are in a better position to know

when reactivity is high and is likely to pose a problem. Knowing someone well enough to determine when you can trust them (and when you cannot) is a crucial part of the ethnographic enterprise.

CONCLUSION

Snow, Benford, and Anderson (1986) find that research roles affect informational yield within a variety of research settings. We extend their argument by illustrating how different fieldwork techniques yield or fail to yield important information for workplace research in particular. Workplace analysis, perhaps as readily as any area of field research, allows the possibility of full immersion in the activity through becoming, at least for a time, an employee who shares the joys and travails of other employees. Both participant observation and nonparticipant observation have the potential to generate insights based on embeddedness in the setting (Adler and Adler 2001; Allen 2000; Hindmarsh and Heath 2000; Miller and Dingwall 1997). Nonparticipant observers may, however, have additional hurdles in being accepted as "one of the gang" since they are not engaged in the activity, and this distinction can have important implications for the quantity and quality of the data collected.

To examine information yield within the context of workplace studies, we present a template of topics fundamental to a grounded understanding of any given workplace. We find that participant observation allows for more informational yield across most of these domains. Furthermore, not only does participant observation provide more information, it also yields thicker description. It is possible that different patterns of the relative effectiveness of participant observation, observation, and interview would be evident in examination of research areas other than workplace studies. We hope that the current article encourages others to systematically investigate the linkages between various qualitative techniques and resulting data yield in other areas of inquiry. For example, what template of key topics is used by researchers studying gangs, cults, or schools? What research techniques provide the best informational yield in these cases, and how do researcher roles fit into this schema? Such investigations could add significantly to the corpus of information and insight on the effectiveness of various qualitative research techniques.

Our study underscores the benefits of observation, and especially participant observation, in workplace studies and concludes that when possible, these techniques are preferable to interviews alone. We do not dismiss the usefulness of interviews, as they are valuable sources of insight across a range of substantive areas. Interviews are, in fact, an indispensable tool in researching phenomena that are difficult to observe, such as intimate family relations and past experiences. The more standard argument that interviews are more suitable than observation for ascertaining norms and attitudes, however, is not supported by our analysis. Observation appears to be equally or even more effective in this regard.

While interviews, formal or informal, may supplement insights gleaned from observation, interviews alone are less effective in providing the degree of detail necessary for understanding subtle worker behaviors and sentiments, work process, and group dynamics. Interview-based studies remove active workers and their voices from these phenomena, losing a good deal of information and limiting the portrayal of the vibrant interconnectivity of individuals, cultures, processes, and organizational arrangements that constitute workplaces and work lives. Simply put, observation allows for the development of a richer canvas from which workplace insights may be drawn.

Our analysis suggests that the problem of reactivity associated with all social science research can also be viewed as an advantage of observational research. Keeping greater distance (and therefore limiting reactivity) by engaging in interviews rather than observation or participatory observation appears, at least in workplace research, to be a recipe for not learning as much. The key to understanding workplaces appears to be to build relationships of trust with participants to gain privileged insider status. Without that status, one is often treated as an outsider and learns less because of reluctance to talk and sometimes active dissembling but also because the outsider has no sense of what is taken for granted.

As a result, observers, especially participant observers, are also better able to link workplace events, experiences, interactions, and attributes to one another, seeing the meaning and connectivity of the various levels of experience (Lopez 2004). The data from the workplace observational studies we examined were so detailed in fact that they often illuminated the inadequacy of some traditional workplace concepts, such as worker-enforced discipline, which took a variety of

forms with very different implications for work process, group dynamics, and workplace behaviors. Predefined concepts and research questions did not circumscribe the scope of these studies, thus allowing the development of new concepts and the discovery of new relationships (Becker and Geer 1970; Geertz 1972; Guba and Lincoln 1994).

Furthermore, interaction with published ethnographic texts varies across a diverse readership. The rich observational data often suggested further insights about potential linkages not highlighted by researchers. In contrast, interview-based studies not only limited thinking beyond the text but also sometimes left coders feeling disconnected from the workplace being studied and unable to establish a firm contact with the workers and their jobs. This uncertainty is reflected in the higher rates of missing data in cases based on interview methodologies and was also a common source of disquiet during debriefings on interview-based cases as we struggled to understand exactly what was being described.

Based on the systematic analysis of 204 book-length qualitative workplace accounts, we find that, at least for workplace studies, participant observation is indeed "the queen of methods." Participant observation produces superior results relative to both nonparticipant observation and interviews in terms of both coverage of topics and richness of description. Studies using nonparticipant observation are of intermediate information yield, between participant observation and interviews but closer to participant observation than to interviews. Thus, observation alone, even without participation, yields a relatively satisfactory level of information about workplaces. Actually doing the work adds to the informational yield, though not as much as moving from interviews to observation. In addition, nonparticipant observers may have the opportunity to more freely move about the workplace. Additional information gained in this way may partly offset their lack of firsthand experience with the nature of the work.

University institutional review boards have become increasingly resistant to granting human subjects clearance for qualitative fieldwork. This resistance stems from the interests of universities in minimizing liabilities potentially generated by the research. However, this fear of liabilities should be balanced against the potential scientific merit of the studies being proposed. Based on an analysis of missing data across the core workplace domains of basic organizational characteristics, worker behaviors and attitudes, work process, group dynamics, and employee-management relations, the current article documents

a greater informational yield and more textured accounts for observation-based studies than for interview-based reports. The social sciences in general, and workplace studies in particular, would suffer significantly from any curtailment of access to the workplace for in-depth observational studies.

NOTES

1. A complete list of the books coded, the content coding sheet, coding protocol, supporting documents, and the content-coded data are available at http://www.sociology.ohio-state.edu/rdh/Workplace-Ethnography-Project.html. As with any content analysis project, we may have made errors in the interpretation of the texts or in the coding of the data. The data, however, are available for public scrutiny and analysis, and we welcome suggestions, criticisms, and alternative views on the recorded data.

2. Researchers' capacity to be viewed as "one of the gang" can be influenced by their mode of access to the workplace as well as the manner in which they are presented to workers. For example, being invited to study the workplace by the employer versus an invitation from a union or government entity may contribute to different interactions and boundaries between the observer and the observed.

REFERENCES

Adler, Patricia A., and Peter Adler. 2001. Off-time labor in resorts: The social construction of commercial time. *American Behavioral Scientist* 44 (7): 1096–1114.

Allen, Davina. 2000. Doing occupational demarcation: The "boundary-work" of nurse managers in a district general hospital. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 29: 326–56.

Anderson, Leon. 1999. The open road to ethnography's future. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 28:500–509.

Averitt, Robert T. 1968. *The dual economy.* New York: Norton.

Becker, Howard S. 2004. Comment on Kevin D. Haggerty, "Ethics creep: Governing social science research in the name of ethics." *Qualitative Sociology* 27:415–16.

Becker, Howard S., and Blanche Geer. 1970. Participant observation and interviewing: A comparison. In *Qualitative methodology*, edited by W. J. Filstead, 133–42. Chicago: Markham.

Besser, Terry L. 1996. *Team Toyota: Transplanting the Toyota culture to the Camry plant in Kentucky.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Burawoy, Michael. 1979. *Manufacturing consent*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 1998. Critical sociology: A dialogue between two sciences. *Contemporary Sociology* 27:12–20.

Burgess, Robert G. 1982. The unstructured interview as a conversation. In *Field research: A sourcebook and field manual*, edited by R. G. Burgess, 107–10. Boston: Allen & Unwin.

Chamberlain, Lindsey, Martha Crowley, Daniel Tope, and Randy Hodson. 2005. Sexual harassment in context: Organizational and occupational foundations of abuse. Paper presented at the 2005 American Sociological Association meetings, August, Philadelphia.

Cock, Jacklyn. 1989. *Maids and madams: Domestic workers under apartheid*. London: Women's Press.

Cressey, Peter. 1985. *Just managing: Authority and democracy in industry.* Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Crozier, Michel. 1971. *The world of the office worker.* David Landau, trans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. 1995. *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Geertz, Clifford. 1972. Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. In *The interpretation of cultures*, edited by Clifford Geertz, 3–30. New York: Basic Books.

Greenberg, Edward S. 1986. *Workplace democracy.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Guba, E. G., and Yvonna S. Lincoln. 1994. Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In *Handbook of qualitative research*, edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 105–17. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Haggerty, Kevin D. 2004. Ethics creep: Governing social science research in the name of ethics. *Qualitative Sociology* 27:391–414.

Haraszti, Miklos. 1978. *A worker in a worker's state*. New York: Universe Books.

Hindmarsh, Jon, and Christian Heath. 2000. Sharing the tools of the trade: The interactional constitution of workplace objects. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 29:523–62.

Hodson, Randy, and Vincent J. Roscigno. 2004. Organizational success and worker dignity: Complimentary or contradictory? *American Journal of Sociology* 110: 672–708.

Juravich, Tom. 1985. *Chaos on the shop floor: A worker's view of quality, productivity, and management*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Kalleberg, Arne L., and Mark E. Van Buren. 1996. Is bigger better? Explaining the relationship between organization size and job rewards. *American Sociological Review* 61:47–66.

Kanter, Rosabeth Moss. 1977. *Men and women of the corporation*. New York: Basic Books.

Kesselman, Amy. 1990. *Fleeting opportunities: Women shipyard workers in Portland and Vancouver during WWII and reconversion*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Kunda, Gideon. 1992. *Engineering culture: Control and commitment in a high-tech corporation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Lofland, John, and Lyn H. Lofland. 1995. *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis*. 3rd ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Lopez, Steven Henry. 2004. *Reorganizing the rust belt: An inside story of the American labor movement*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Manning, Peter K. 1992. *Organizational communication*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
Metz, Donald L. 1981. *Running hot: Structure and stress in ambulance work*. Cambridge, MA: ABT Books.
Milkman, Ruth. 1997. *Farewell to the factory: Auto workers in the late Twentieth Century.* Berkeley: University of California Press.
Miller, Gale, and Robert Dingwall. 1997. *Context and method in qualitative research*. London: Sage.
Morrill, Calvin. 1995. *The executive way: Conflict management in corporations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Ogasawara, Yuko. 1998. *Office ladies and salaried men: Power, gender, and work in Japanese companies*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Orr, Julian. 1996. *Talking about machines: An ethnography of a modern job.* New York: Cornell University Press.
Roscigno, Vincent J., and Randy Hodson. 2004. The organizational and social foundations of worker resistance. *American Sociological Review* 69:14–39.
Roy, Donald. 1960. Banana time: Job satisfaction and informal interaction. *Human Organization* 18:156–68.
Snow, David, Robert Benford, and Leon Anderson. 1986. Fieldwork roles and informational yield: A comparison of alternative settings and roles. *Urban Life* 14:377–408.
Street, Annette Fay. 1992. *Inside nursing: A critical ethnography of clinical nursing practice*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
Vallas, Steven P. 1987. The labor process as a source of class consciousness: A critical examination. *Sociological Forum* 2:237–56.
Vecsey, George. 1974. *One sunset a week*. New York: Saturday Review.
Wilkinson-Weber, Clare M. 1999. *Embroidering lives: Women's work in the Lucknow embroidery industry.* Albany: State University of New York Press.
Zelditch, Jr., Morris. 1982. Some methodological problems of field studies. In *Field research: A sourcebook and field manual*, edited by R. G. Burgess, 168–75. Boston: Allen & Unwin.