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Jan Savage  
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Participative Observation: Standing in the Shoes of Others?

Jan Savage

This article argues that participant observation is more than mere method and in need of greater theoretical attention. This is particularly true for its more participative forms, which are inseparable from assumptions about the role of the body in the generation of knowledge. Drawing on fieldwork experience, parallels are noted between participative observation and the clinical practice of nursing, for example, their reliance on physical involvement, their claims to experiential knowledge, and the associated theoretical assumptions they share, such as a reciprocity of perspective between subject and object. Such assumptions need to be examined if the knowledge learnt through participation is to carry weight.

My mother raised me to be wary of wearing someone else's shoes. Second-hand shoes, she argued, unlike second-hand clothes, retain the form of previous wearers. Such shoes are shaped by the habits of earlier occupants, and they press these dispositions on subsequent wearers with crippling effect. This maternal warning seems strangely relevant when we talk about research approaches in which the researcher purports to stand in the shoes of others: Put crudely, the shoes may be our size, but we cannot assume that they will fit.

This point is particularly germane for those who practice participant observation, especially in its more participative forms. Although it is still not widely used, participant observation is attracting interest as qualitative approaches, particularly ethnography, become more common in health care research. It remains, however, the object of surprisingly little theoretical attention. In this article, it is suggested that this is partly because participant observation has widely been classified as a research method or a theoretically uninformed technique.

This argument plunges us into rather muddy waters about the distinction between different components of the research process. The terms method, methodology, theoretical perspective, and epistemology are often used interchangeably, as if they have some equivalence (Crotty, 1998). Yet attempts to differentiate these elements tend to fix them in ways that overlook their interdependency. This seems particularly problematic in the case of participant observation. Participant observation is often described as a method, but it incorporates a range of approaches to data collection, including what I call “participative observation,” in which physical involvement in the field cannot be divorced from the researcher’s theoretical or

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epistemological suppositions. Thus, the data collected will rest on the researcher’s assumptions concerning, for example, a mind-body dichotomy or the extent to which “the body is the obvious point of departure for any processes of knowing” (Rudberg, 1997, p. 182).

For this reason and for want of a better term, I shall refer to participative observation as a methodology rather than a method to emphasize the way that it is epistemologically informed. Ellen (1984) observes that methodology means different things to different people, but here I draw on his own definition of methodology as “an articulated, theoretically informed approach to the production of data” (p. 9).

There is, of course, no homogenous view of participant observation. The dominant view represented in research textbooks and manuals is that participant observation is a method, instrument, or technique for data collection (see Baille, 1995; Boyle, 1991; Grbich, 1999; Spradley, 1980). Tonkin (1984), however, states categorically that “participant observation is not, and cannot be, a method” (p. 221), arguing that because the researcher becomes the medium of research, features such as the age, gender, and personality of the researcher will direct the findings. Similarly, Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) suggest that participant observation is less of a technique than “a mode of being in the world characteristic of researchers” (p. 249). Others are more ambivalent, acknowledging that participant observation can be used as a research strategy (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) or as “the method for the study . . . rather than as the data collection technique” (Morse & Field, 1995, p. 106), whereas Burawoy (1991, p. 3) refers to participant observation as a technique but hints at its potential as a methodology for social science research.

Jorgensen (1989) is more definite in claiming participant observation as a methodology, noting its primary association with the data collection methods of direct observation and experience. He suggests that, as a methodology, participant observation consists of principles, strategies, methods, and techniques of research, and its many features include “a form of theory and theorizing stressing interpretation and understanding of human existence” (p. 13). However, the theorizing that Jorgensen refers to appears to concern the data and not the process of acquiring it: “The methodology of participant observation provokes concepts and generalizations formulated as interpretive theories” (p. 16).

At the very least then, the nature of participant observation is contested and in need of consideration. However, the issues raised by the ambiguity of participant observation also have broader relevance. The question of whether it is a method or a methodology is more than a rather banal matter of classification. It becomes significant, for example, in the context of attempts to dismantle the divide between quantitative and qualitative research and integrate methodological ideas and methods in a new framework for social science research (e.g., see Hammersley, 1992). According to Grbich (1999), this trend seeks to reduce qualitative approaches in general to mere techniques that are seemingly “separate from the epistemological positions that influence question conceptualisation, data collection and interpretation” (p. 17). It is, she suggests, only through such separation that qualitative and quantitative approaches become compatible. Although I have no intention of joining this debate here, it suggests something about the implications of assigning the term method.

The argument is also relevant in another way. There are certain parallels between participant observation and practice-based professions or occupations such as nursing, which suggests that an examination of one might increase our understanding of the other. Nursing, for example, is at risk for being understood
predominantly as a range of practical activities and techniques, as if these can be divorced from the philosophical and epistemological positions (i.e., the beliefs about the nature of nursing knowledge and what constitutes legitimate knowledge) that often inform them. Moreover, both nurses and participative observers generate knowledge as a result of gathering sensory data while existing within a tradition of thought that, since the Enlightenment, has questioned the veracity of knowledge gleaned through the senses, particularly those other than sight (Classen, 1993). Finally, both nurses and participative observers, if for different reasons, suggest that they can stand in the shoes of others. Jorgensen (1989), for example, suggests that those researchers who become intensely involved in the participant observer role can “become the phenomenon” (p. 63) under study and experience it existentially, whereas many nurses claim special understanding of patients as part of their caring role (e.g., see Brykczynska, 1997, on empathy; Lawler, 1991, on somology; Savage, 1995, on closeness).

This article is therefore concerned with exploring some of the issues that become evident once participant observation is regarded as epistemologically based or beyond the conventional understanding of method. This article first looks at the various and often ambiguous understandings of participant observation before focusing on the variant that I term participative observation, which attempts to derive knowledge using all the senses. Parallels between the process of knowledge production in some forms of nursing and in participative observation are suggested, highlighting three specific areas of concern: (a) assumptions of a reciprocity of perspective between the researcher (or nurse) and the researched (or patient), (b) the fixed or enduring nature of the subject, and (c) the possibility of translating non-verbal knowledge into language.

**PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION**

Participant observation has been described as an oxymoron, combining two apparently contradictory terms, in this case, with confusing results. As Tonkin (1984) has pointed out, within sociology, participant observation can refer both to a positivist tradition of observing a social field with the minimum of interference (the sociologist as a fly on the wall) and a contrary view in which observers have to totally participate in the social field if they are to gain shared meanings.

According to Tonkin (1984), despite a tradition of fieldwork and direct observation, “There is no substantive theoretical treatment of the term [participant observation] in British social anthropology” (p. 217). She suggests that the term was first used as late as the 1960s by Frankenberg (1963), who argued for the importance of experiential aspects of fieldwork in understanding what is unfamiliar or other.

Over time, participant observation has become almost synonymous with the work of the anthropologist (Tonkin, 1984), and confusingly, it is often used interchangeably with the term *ethnography*. Agar (1980, p. 114), for example, suggests that the best term for ethnography is *participant observation*, whereas in a chapter titled “Ethnography and Participant Observation” by Atkinson and Hammersley (1994), participant observation becomes invisible as a discrete phenomenon. Similarly, in his book *Participant Observation*, Spradley (1980) has essentially written about how to carry out ethnography or “the ethnographic research cycle” (p. 26).
Although he suggests that there is a particular kind of participant observation that leads to ethnographic description, he devotes only a few pages of the book to this, which fundamentally deal with the possible roles and techniques that can be adopted rather than any attendant theoretical issues. Grbich (1999) is unusual in arguing that ethnography and participant observation cannot be used interchangeably because ethnography, as “the description and explanation of regularities and variations within a culture” (p. 121), is a methodology, whereas participant observation, a way of gathering data, is no more than a technique. Indeed, when not conflated with ethnography, participant observation is often portrayed as the primary, if not essential, mode of data collection for a classic ethnography (see Holy, 1984; Morse, 1989; Pelto & Pelto, 1978).

Varieties of Participant Observation

There is evidence of a close, if unstable, relationship between participant observation and ethnography. However, what tends to be overlooked is that both constituents of this relationship are ambiguous in character. For example, the term ethnography has no single agreed-on meaning and can refer just as much to a philosophical paradigm to which the researcher is totally committed as it can to a method employed by researchers on a pragmatic basis (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). Even within a philosophical paradigm, ethnography remains a contested domain, with different kinds of ethnographies underpinned by different epistemological positions (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). Denzin (1997), for example, finds that realist ethnography, in which “ethnographers connect meaning (culture) to observable action in the real world” (p. xvi), is inadequate because it assumes the ethnographer’s interpretative authority and gives priority to what he calls a “visual, ocular epistemology” (p. xvi), one that privileges knowledge deriving from sight. Instead, he argues for a postmodernist ethnography that attempts to find ways of “feeling our way into the experiences of self and other...an evocative epistemology that performs, rather than represents the world” (p. xviii).

Similarly, participant observation has no single agreed-on meaning. For example, most accounts of participant observation describe it through reference to points on a spectrum, marking a range of roles for the researcher that traditionally gave emphasis to the collection of visual data. Classifications predicated on the observational are provided by Gold (1958) and Spradley (1980). Gold defines the participant observer as full participant, participant as observer, observer as participant, or complete observer. Similarly, Spradley provides a taxonomy of nonparticipative, passively, moderately, actively, and completely participative observation. Other more recent approaches, however, give less emphasis to the observational and a greater stress on the involvement of the researcher, for example, Adler and Adler’s (1994) scheme of complete member researcher, active member researcher, and peripheral member researcher.

The formulation of these different roles and their adoption by individual researchers rest in part on the way that observation is understood and the differing values placed on visually derived knowledge and knowledge generated by the lived experience of the researcher who intentionally draws on all the senses. These values and interpretations, however, are rarely made explicit. For example, participant observation has been defined as:
a technique of unobtrusive, shared or overtly subjective data collection, which involves a researcher spending time in an environment observing [italics added] behaviour, action and interaction, so that he/she can understand the meanings constructed in that environment and can make sense of everyday live experiences. These understandings are used to generate conceptual/theoretical explanations of what is being observed [italics added]. (Grbich, 1999, pp. 123-124)

This definition alone presents the researcher who is considering the use of this approach with a number of choices. The more obvious and the more debated of these choices concerns the extent to which participant observation is to be overt or covert. Less recognized is the contested nature of observation and how the interpretation of this term will inform subsequent data collection.

Significantly, the word observe can be taken to mean “to keep in view” or “to subject to systematic watching” (Macdonald, 1972), interpretations which stress the visual nature of observation. At the same time though, the observable can be understood as that which can be ascertained “by the senses” (Macdonald, 1972). Making a choice between variants of participant observation will therefore be influenced by the researcher’s (and no doubt other stakeholders’) views on the meaning of observation and on the veracity of knowledge gleaned by different senses. Western culture is understood to have shifted from privileging the audible to the visual following the invention of the alphabet and the printing press, with the subsequent development of a mode of thought characterized as predominantly objective, linear, analytic, and fragmented (Classen, 1993). This shift in privilege is reflected in academic discourses on knowledge, which are informed by what Salmond (1982) has called “epistemological metaphors” (p. 66), with terms such as reflect, focus, view, insight, or perceptive that evoke the notion that understanding is a matter of seeing. As Classen (1993) notes, sight is the sense of science, which is championed by rationalists and empiricists such as Descartes and Locke for its detachment. However, this visualist bias in Western thought implies a spatialization of consciousness, an assumption of distance between the knower and the known that allows one to be an impartial observer and the other to be subject to the observer’s gaze (Jackson, 1989). Much will depend, therefore, on the theoretical stance taken by a participant observer and whether they give the term observation a visual gloss.

Participant Observation as Methodology

All this is to suggest that if participant observation refers to a complex of research approaches, some of which may be underpinned by different epistemological assumptions, it is inappropriate to regard it simply as an atheoretical technique. This would allow the values and beliefs informing its use to remain implicit and unexplored. Instead, I argue that at least certain forms of participant observation might be better understood as methodology (as defined by Ellen, 1984) so that the trustworthiness of the research and the status of the knowledge it generates can be scrutinized.

According to Holy (1984), one of the striking differences between the natural and social sciences is the degree of concern that they exhibit with regard to methodology, largely because of the inherent difference in the relationship that exists for each between the observer and the observed. Although for the natural scientist there has been a relatively clear distinction between the observer and the observed,
the social scientist finds the distinction to be questionable or blurred. The concern with methodology in the social sciences therefore arises from the need to deal with the influences between the subject and the object and the consequences of these influences for the kind of knowledge produced by social science research. The lack of attention to the epistemological problems potentially raised by some variants of participant observation suggests that these have generally been considered from a positivistic perspective.

The work of Ashworth (1995) supports this assertion. He suggests that there are two broad tendencies in the theoretical position of methodological writers that shape the discourse on participant observation: neopositivist and postmodernist. Some accounts of participant observation, he argues, are shaped by the conviction that scientific rigor, notably the generation of reliable and valid data, is possible with participant observation. To support this position, such accounts present univocal data, playing down the social interaction that underpins participant observation and introduces ambiguity and subjectivity. By contrast, in postmodernist accounts, the view of the participant observer is understood as inevitably multivocal and the joint product of a group of informants and their observer. However, the relationship between the observer and the observed is, according to Ashworth, usually assumed to be unproblematic. He argues that because major protagonists of postmodernism dismiss humanistic assumptions and argue that because “the person is to be regarded as the channel of culture rather than an agent” (p. 371), the role of the participant observer is given little significance. Thus, according to Ashworth, there is no systematic consideration of the practice of participant observation in either neopositivist or postmodern approaches.

Although not all researchers would agree that issues raised by the relationship between the participant observer and the informants have escaped the attention of postmodern scholars (see Nast, 1998), Ashworth’s (1995) work has directed attention to the theoretical understanding of the process of participant observation. It does, however, deal largely with the potential of a social psychological approach and the meaning of participation, for the most part, in terms of issues such as membership role, identity, and impression management. His reference to the necessity of emotional and motivational attunement, supported by a quote from Goffman (1972), “to be awkward or unkempt, to talk or move wrongly is to be a dangerous giant” (p. 72), hints at the importance of the lived body in the process of participant observation. However, there is no development of this insight in Ashworth’s argument. Yet, as Leder (1992) puts it, we cannot understand those things external and separate to us “without reference to bodily powers through which we engage them—our senses, motility, language, desires. The lived body is not just one thing in the world but a way in which the world comes to be” (p. 25). At the same time, this lived body is not ahistorical, acultural, or biologically given, but it is an embodied subjectivity that is differently represented, experienced, and used in different socio-cultural environments (Grosz, 1994). Surprisingly, although the socialized, experiencing body of the researcher is the medium for some forms of participant observation, there has been very little theoretical attention given to the relationship between the embodied subjectivities of researcher and informants and the implications of a socially inscribed, experiencing body for the production of knowledge.
Participative Observation

Using the self as a research tool has been a characteristic of existential sociology (Fontana, 1984), the self in this instance being understood as inseparable from the physical body and from feelings and emotions. Within anthropology, there are parallel developments of “sensual scholarship” (Stoller, 1997, p. xiii) or “radical empiricism” (Jackson, 1989, p. 3), which attempt to incorporate data provided by the lived body of the researcher into ethnographic description to reach aspects of experience that (visual) observation alone would overlook. One example of this is provided by Stoller (1989), who describes how he came to understand the resentment and anger of one of his Songhay informants as he tasted the intentionally disgusting sauce she had made when obliged to cook for her husband’s guests. As Jackson (1989) has put it, “We must come to [knowledge] through participation as well as observation and not dismiss lived experience . . . as ‘interference’ or ‘noise’ to be filtered out in the process of creating an objective report for our profession” (p. 9).

Underlying this radical empirical approach is the assumption that two interacting individuals can stand in each other’s shoes and understand the world from the other’s perspective. This surmise will be considered in more detail later. For now, however, the point is that the presumption of reciprocity that lies at the heart of such participative observation raises theoretical concerns that bear a strong resemblance to those raised by the project of nursing, when this is understood as a therapeutic use of self on the part of the nurse (e.g., see Ersser, 1997). Exploring such concerns may have a broader relevance beyond the field of research.

Nursing and Participative Observation

First, there are certain parallels between the process through which aspects of nursing knowledge are produced and the process of producing knowledge through participative observation. Just as participative observers may be concerned with the relationship between their own lived experience in the field and that of their subjects so too are nurses concerned with the relationship between their own and their patient’s lived experience. Lawler (1991), albeit without recourse to participative observation, has described the kind of knowledge that nurses can develop with regard to their patients’ experience of an ailing or compromised body as “somology,” which describes nurses’ understanding of the patient’s body as simultaneously “an object, a means of experience, a manner of presence among other people, and a part of one’s personal identity” (p. 29). However, this claim of a particular kind of knowledge rests on certain epistemological assumptions about the possibility of a reciprocity of perspective or the availability of one person’s lived experience to another. These assumptions need to be made explicit and explored in depth if claims for the somological knowledge of nurses are to be recognized beyond nursing.

Second, if, as Lawler (1991) and others imply, such experience is largely articulated by nonverbal means and glimpsed perhaps through physical activity (such as a bed bath) that jointly involves the nurse and patient, on what grounds can we assume that this can be translated: Is there a way of putting non-language-like knowledge into words? Translation is clearly an issue for researchers adopting participative observation, but it is also of central importance for clinical nurses in terms of transmitting any understanding that they develop with regard to their patients’ lived experience to others. Such transmission can be seen as important at the local
level for the provision of a coherent program of individualized care by nurses. More broadly, it has relevance for the decisions of clinicians in the health care team, health service managers, and even policy makers; the articulation of such knowledge is crucial for dealing with what Robinson (1992) has described as “nursing’s invisibility to virtually everyone except nurses” (pp. 4-5).

Finally, the focus of nursing knowledge, the embodied person of the patient, is not fixed but characterized by transience: Even if the patient is not mobile, he or she is still moving through time and through an illness trajectory. Knowing the patient, which some regard as the heart of nursing, is partly a temporal process (MacLeod, 1993) and one that is not generally amenable to the kind of scrutiny associated with current trends toward evidence-based practice, with its emphasis, for example, on the measurable, on empirical evidence, and on the care of relatively fixed populations rather than of mutable individuals (Tonelli, 1998).

These issues—the assumption of the reciprocity of perspective, the transience of the subject, and the problem of translating non-language-like knowledge into language—share significance for both the practice of nursing and that of participative observation and thus demand detailed attention.

Participative Observation in a Study of Nurse-Patient Interaction

The research I used to examine the parallels between participative observation and the clinical practice of nursing involved the study of nurse-patient interaction in a medical/surgical gastrointestinal ward using an ethnographic approach. Participative observation was central to the way in which the study was designed and carried out, a result of an interest in Jackson’s (1989) proposal for radical empiricism (for a fuller account of the study, see Savage, 1995, 1997). I was particularly interested in understanding the experience of nurses working in an environment where they were encouraged to develop close interpersonal relationships with their patients and the kinds of support mechanisms they might need (see Savage, 1995, pp. 10-13).

It emerged that closeness meant an emotional connection, often brought about by an exchange of confidences between nurse and patient that was often developed and sustained by physical proximity or the sharing of common space. Thus, the body of the nurse, its location in particular spaces (such as the patient’s space), and its relation to the body of the patient became central issues for the research. These issues would not have emerged without the use of some form of observation. An important question remains, however, as to how much the study’s findings were influenced by the adoption of a highly participative form of participant observation, with its underlying assumptions concerning the accessibility and translation of the nonverbal knowledge represented by the body in action, whether this was the body of the nurse or the body of the researcher. In other words, the study provides a useful vehicle for considering the issues identified earlier in this article.

The Assumption of Reciprocity of Perspective

As stated earlier, one of the main assumptions underlying the participative observation employed in this study was that researchers who bodily place themselves in the
same situations as those who they study will gain a deeper understanding of their informants’ world than if they restricted themselves to verbal inquiry. Jackson (1989), for instance, argues that knowledge is often embedded in practices rather than speech and that an empathic understanding of this knowledge can be approached by the participant observer through the imitation of the other’s bodily actions. By way of example, he reveals that when he first began to live with the Kuranko of Sierra Leone he assumed that lighting his own fire for cooking and boiling water had little relevance for his research. However, after observing Kuranko women over time, he became interested in their very precise techniques for building and lighting fires. By adopting their actions, he came to realize that these techniques maximized the scarce firewood, produced the right flame for cooking, and enabled the control of the fire’s intensity. Not only this, “It made me see the close relationship between economy of effort and grace of movement; it made me realise the common sense which informs even the most elementary tasks in a Kuranko village” (pp. 134-135). In other words, Jackson acquired a degree of Kuranko common sense knowledge through practical participation.

Although the possibility of such access to the knowledge of others is enormously appealing, Jackson’s (1989) argument is flawed: In attempting to reach the culturally specific knowledge of others through the body, he overlooks the degree to which the experience of the body is culturally constructed and interpreted. Instead, he implies that once all cultural trappings have been stripped away, there will be a common or shared experience of the body that exists independently of cultural influences and meanings. As Farnell (1994) puts it, “To assume . . . that the sheer fact of embodiment allows one to inhabit the world of the Other, is to reduce cultural body to biological organism” (p. 937).

To return to the nursing ethnography, despite wishing to learn as much as possible about the experience of nurses on the ward through participation in the same everyday activities, there were clear limits to realizing this aim. First of all, I had not practiced as a nurse for some time and was not competent to attempt many aspects of the nurses’ work. My participation was, therefore, limited to activities such as helping with the bathing of patients, sitting and talking with patients, fetching and carrying, and generally trying to make myself useful. I also participated in less practical activities such as ward meetings and the handover process (the systematic reporting on patients that took place when any new shift of work began).

The handover has been seen as an important site for the oral transmission of nursing knowledge about specific patients and as “a significant site at which nurses articulate and communicate their practice and sense of professionalism” (Parker & Wiltshire, 1995, p. 151). What I found, however, was that the bedside handover was also a form of praxis in which nurses could help define the boundaries of their practice through their use of the body. At the same time, rather than invariably forging an empathic understanding of the nurses’ world, participation in the handover was an activity that often served to demonstrate the differences that existed between myself and the other nurses.

When I attended handovers, I was initially encouraged by other nurses to sit or squat at the bedside. This gesture was explained in terms of getting down to the patient’s level and was an integral part of the nurse-patient interaction beyond the handover. With the bedside handover, however, the actions of sinking and rising on the part of the nurse were emphasized when the three teams of nurses spread across the ward all rose and sank in what seemed to be an orchestrated undulation, a kind
of Mexican wave. I came to understand this wave as a performance of nursing values. Although adopting the patient’s level at the bedside was an explicit attempt to make the patient feel more included and an equal partner, the collective activity of the Mexican wave also seemed to emphasize the suppleness and agility of the nurses. It drew attention to their youth. It marked their good health in the context of a sea of illness, and it suggested flexibility, not just in terms of limbs or joints but also in terms of their approach to their patients. In their pliancy, nurses contrasted themselves to their medical colleagues who, nurses suggested, were generally not only formal and physically stiff in their approach to patients but also unbending in terms of protocols and regimes.

However, as a participant, the handover felt rather different. Although I was included in the handover as a nurse, I felt myself being marked out as different, not simply because my nursing knowledge and skills were limited but also because I inhabited my body differently to other nurses. Not only was I significantly older than my colleagues but my lack of knowledge and lack of ease were also written on this older body. Although other nurses moved gracefully from standing to squatting or kneeling and to standing again, I felt stiff and awkward. My knees would creak as I attempted to keep up with other nurses in the team, proclaiming that I was neither flexible nor youthful. It was interesting that, although I became no younger, I became less stiff the longer I stayed on the ward, and I had glimpses, through this looser stance, of my earlier years as a nurse in whom competence was embodied in sure and fluid movement. However, there was no escaping the fact that these memories or competencies from earlier times were recalled in the context of a different body, with additional meanings inscribed within it and on it; even in mimicking the actions or movements of others, the researcher’s body was not a tabula rasa on which the experiences of others could be drawn, unsullied by those of the researcher. To put it in terms of the discussion above, although there were a number of experiences that were broadly shared with many nurses on the ward (such as being female), the extent to which we could assume a reciprocity of perspective by virtue of our shared participation in the life of the ward was limited by a range of factors, such as our different ages, physical status, life experience, and competence in the job at hand. These differences were neither wholly cultural nor wholly physiological, but they posed considerable hurdles for me as a researcher who was philosophically committed to the tenets of radical empiricism. Becoming aware of them during the study was a useful reminder that the experience of the body cannot be willfully stripped of the meanings previously inscribed on it.

The Transience of the Subject

This leads to a second point about the nature of the relationship between the body of the researcher and that of the researched. In the burgeoning literature on the body (see Featherstone, Hepworth, & Turner, 1991; Lawler, 1997; Nettleton & Watson, 1998; Shilling, 1993; Stam, 1998; Synnott, 1993; Williams & Bendelow, 1998), there is often an inability to account for fully moving or acting bodies (Farnell, 1994). There are few attempts to explain how physical actions, whether these be a matter of deliberate behavior or of less-than-conscious habit, produce meaning. However, the difficulties of describing physical actions are made clear by Phelan (1997) in her discussion of performance art. She notes that in performing (as in many other situations),
the central object of attention, the moving body, is continually disappearing. Writing about performance is, she suggests, a writing of history, an attempt to preserve and represent something that is already lost. Rather than construct a phantom of the moving body, or what Phelan calls “an illustrated corpse” (p. 3), to stand in place of the embodied performance, she seeks “the possibility that something substantial can be made from the outline left after the body has disappeared” (p. 3).

Clearly, this transience of the body in action, this loss of object, poses a significant problem for the participant observer, although the problem is redrawn by the fact that the body in question is not that of another but that of the researcher. Surprisingly however, given that researchers are increasingly expected to make the self a source of data, the embodied experience of the researcher has been given little attention to date. Although the researcher is encouraged to engage in conscious and critical self-reflection, in practice, this process has tended to be passive and cerebral, that is, taking place “inside human heads” (Nast, 1998, p. 99). As Rudberg (1997) puts it,

The self-reflexive strand of postpositivist methodology, where researchers are told to take their “selves” into account not only as bias but even more as resource of empirical research, has not resulted in a particularly great interest in the bodily anchorage of all those free-floating selves. (p. 182)

Bringing this “bodily anchorage” into focus, however, is no simple matter. Perhaps it is possible to overcome some of the difficulties of trying to capture the observable and fading actions of others by focusing on the lived experience of the researcher. However, the researcher’s body in action is no less transient than that of any other’s. Participative observation, therefore, partly rests on an assumption that the researcher’s lived experience can be recollected after the event, that the body is a mnemonic device, a repository and expression of memories. This assumption is made clear in the work of Okely (1992), for example, who suggests that field notes from participative observation “may be no more than a trigger for bodily and hitherto subconscious memories” (p. 16) (see also Bourdieu, 1977, on the body as memory; Mitchell, 1997, on the body as social memory; Stoller, 1997, on the senses as triggers of cultural memory). The account above, which suggested that memories of nursing competence were awakened through the body, is also relevant here. Besides highlighting the way that interpreting fieldwork may involve moving between the past and the present, between memory and lived experience, this quote from Okely also introduces other planes of experience that the participative observer may oscillate between, namely, the conscious and the subconscious. The way that nurses adopted a collective stance (see, e.g., the description of the Mexican wave earlier) raises the question of the extent to which the nurses’ praxis was a matter of conscious deliberation. The following example from participative observation may be helpful in answering this question. At the same time, it demonstrates the mutable nature of the researcher’s lived experience, more specifically, the way that different practical conduct was adopted before there was any awareness of change taking place and that what felt subjectively right or appropriate could be transformed without conscious intent.

When I began participative observation, I was a little astonished by the way that nurses used touch in an apparently deliberate and routine way. During handovers, for example, nurses would reach out and touch patients as a way of incorporating
them into the handover discussion. Similarly, when going to sit with a patient, it
appeared to be an automatic gesture to reach out and hold the patient’s hand, even
if patients were not distressed or did not require technical assistance. Initially, and
no doubt influenced by recollections of past practice, I resisted this aspect of nursing
praxis, knowing that I would feel profoundly uncomfortable using touch in this
way. However, over time, without noticing when or how it happened, I realized
that I had begun to make use of touch in a way that was very similar to that of the
other nurses’ and, moreover, that this new approach to touch began to feel instinc-
tively right or appropriate, at least in the context of this particular ward and its
patient group. In other words, the experience I had of physical involvement in
patient care, and what felt appropriate, was not a simple, conscious imitation of
other nurses’ behavior but part of a slow adaptation brought about by participation
within a specific context, an absorption of praxis that bypassed any mental process-
ing. This mutability of the participative observer’s lived experience, experience that
might be understood to form the very bedrock of his or her worldview, suggests
that the findings of participative observation have to be viewed as unfixed and his-
torically specific points of understanding on a continuum of inquiry.

The Nonlinguistic Nature of Knowledge
From Participation

Finally, there is the issue of the nonlinguistic nature of knowledge derived by par-
ticipation, which raises questions about the relationship between experience and
language. Traditionally, language has been assumed to provide the primary route of
entry into any culture (Hastrup & Hervik, 1994, p. 80), an assumption that is increas-
ingly challenged. In considering the importance of language for cultural knowl-
edge, Bloch (1991) argues that there is no inevitable connection between concepts
and words. Bloch bases this argument on studies involving prelinguistic children
who are found to learn to speak by trying to match words to the concepts that they
have already formed; for example, children will have the concept of house before
they can say the word. According to Bloch, much of knowledge is fundamentally
nonlinguistic, with its concepts representing networks of meanings formed
through experience or practice in the external world. This nonlinguistic knowledge
can be transformed into language under certain circumstances, although it will
change character in the process.

Perhaps partly because of the difficulties of transformation, however, such non-
linguistic knowledge is often lost in the process of writing up research. Bloch (1991)
is one of a growing number of anthropologists (see Jackson, 1989; Okely, 1994;
Stoller, 1989) to admit that, in his own writings, he has tended to seek verbal
accounts from informants that confirm impressions that he has already gained by
practical involvement in everyday life. However, he has presented these verbal
accounts as if they have provided the basis of his understanding, although his
“knowledge was established prior to these linguistic confirmations” (p. 194).

Elsewhere, Kohn (1994) has suggested that an initial lack of linguistic ability
during her fieldwork among the Yakha of eastern Nepal was a positive attribute:
Her subsequent alertness to nonlinguistic cues allowed her a grasp of cultural
knowledge that would have escaped her if she had started fieldwork with the abil-
ity to converse with informants.
Although she is careful to note that even if they shared the same bowl of rice, it would be impossible to know the extent to which they shared the taste and experience of eating it, Kohn (1994) draws an analogy between the position of the anthropologist and the non-Yakhan brides who marry into Yakhan society and spend most of their time in situations in which the language of everyday interaction is incomprehensible to them: “They absorb new sights, sounds, rhythms, silences, feelings and tastes amidst a backdrop of Yakha gibberish” (p. 13). Kohn suggests that although both incoming bride and anthropologist can take no active part initially in the talk that goes on around them, they of necessity must physically interact with people in a range of shared activities, for example, fetching water and planting crops. Becoming Yakhan, it transpired, was largely a matter of learning Yakhan ways of doing things, of acquiring practical mastery in everyday activities such as cooking and making offerings to gods. This kind of knowledge was not language-like but could, to some extent, be captured in words. There were, however, other aspects of Yakhan culture beyond those associated with everyday tasks that were hard to say and only detectable in the subtleties of nonverbal social interactions. As Kohn puts it, “I would suggest that this unknown something, this quality of culture that we may unwittingly access before anything else, comes alive through senses other than visual observation or linguistic comprehension and expression” (p. 18).

Kohn (1994) concludes that although the researcher may come close to experiencing the worlds of informants, they will always be experiencing this through the filter of their own cultural world:

[Ultimately] we are stuck knowing that we are working with second-hand experiences. . . . We have the ability to imagine our informant’s pains, joys and first impressions because we are often painfully aware of our own, even if we cannot find words that fully describe them. (p. 25)

Drawing on the analogy of the anthropologist and the incoming bride, there are ways in which I ostensibly shared similarities with neophyte student nurses who had clinical placements in the ward. Although I was less at sea than Kohn was on arrival in Yakhan society, much of the nursing language was unfamiliar to me. Participation in ward work helped to downplay my sense of difference and earned me a degree of acceptance. Acceptance, however, was not straightforwardly linked to competence. One of the activities in which I participated was the bathing of patients, either in bed or in the bath. The bathing of patients or clients is widely, but erroneously, viewed as a simple task requiring no special skills (Twigg, 1996; van Manen, 1998). Having not bathed a patient for some years, I should not have been surprised, perhaps, to find this a difficult procedure in which I felt annoyingly clumsy, both physically and socially. I had lost the art of the bed bath as a flowing sequence of actions that not only got the job done but also suggested a set of cultural competencies in which the patient’s condition and the strange intimacy between nurse and patient are negotiated and minimized (Lawler, 1991). I knew from my lack of a sure touch and the loss of appropriate gestures and movements that I had only fulfilled the very basic requirements of the blanket bath. This lack of competence was also clearly palpable to others; for example, one patient who was being discharged showed how he had taken me for a novice when he said, “Goodbye my dear, I know you are going to make a fine nurse one day.”
The kind of knowledge underpinning the practical mastery of the bed bath is of a sort that is nonetheless “hard to say,” as Kohn (1994) puts it. I did, however, glimpse something of its nature through participative observation, although this was largely by finding out what I did not know. As for translating it into words, I can attempt to do this by suggesting that it is concerned with an embodied or intuitive understanding of what is comfortable or uncomfortable for the patient, a knowledge of the means of achieving this, and the sense of achieving it through a proficiency characterized by smooth, purposeful actions. However, as Kohn found, this knowledge is only partially depictable in linguistic terms and only really comes alive through experience. Sharing the same experience (Kohn’s question of whether a bowl of rice tastes the same to different people) cannot be assumed, and therefore, the accuracy of translation is doubly compromised.

CONCLUSION

There are certain parallels between the practice of participative observation and the practice of nursing. Both, to varying degrees, attempt to understand the worldview of others through practical participation and the generation of data derived from the senses. This article suggests that this kind of radical empiricism rests on a number of assumptions that need to be made explicit and addressed if the knowledge gleaned by a participative approach is to be considered useful or meaningful. The assumptions considered here are that (a) transient experience can be captured and represented, (b) there is a straightforward relationship between experience and language in that what is known can always be put into words, and (c) experience is commensurable, thus the researcher’s medium for experience—the body—can be treated as if it exists independently of the sociocultural meanings previously inscribed on it.

This is not to argue that using the body as a medium for inquiry is without value. Instead, it suggests that participative observation, as one variant of participant observation, needs to be considered as more than a method that can be stripped of theoretical bias. Once participative observation is recognized as being underpinned by specific philosophical positions, it becomes possible to identify the assumptions that shape data collection and the framework by which findings can be assessed. At the same time, laying bare the theoretical assumptions concerning the processes of knowledge generation in practice-based occupations, such as nursing, may ultimately give greater credibility to practitioners when they claim to speak on the part of their clients or to be able to stand in their shoes.

NOTES

1. Hammersley’s (1992) argument about ethnography is relevant here. He posits “ethnography as one method among others, and the methodological ideas associated with it as relevant to all research” (p. 202).
2. A note from Ellen, the editor of the volume in which Tonkin’s (1984) work appears, states that all contributors have adopted the same meaning for methodology.
3. The term praxis is used here to mean practical conduct informed by artistic, ethical, and political considerations (Johnson & Ratner, 1997).
REFERENCES


Jan Savage, R.N., Ph.D., is a nurse anthropologist and senior research fellow at the Royal College of Nursing Institute, London. She has published work on gender and sexuality in nursing and more recently on the role of the nurse’s body, both in the provision of care and in strategies for occupational closure.