Ethnography and Participant Observation: Political Science Research in this "Late Methodological Moment"

Introduction

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> *The ethnographic turn takes its inspiration, in part, from the street-level [Lipsky 1980] project's implicit encouragement to researchers to get out from behind their desks in order to investigate and even* experience *the realities of everyday organizational life.*
>
> —Evelyn Z. Brodkin (2012, 946, original emphasis)

> *[E]thnography produces detailed evidence of the sort that can . . . call into question . . . the generalizations produced or meanings assigned by other research traditions.*
>
> —Edward Schatz (2009, 10)

This symposium celebrates the contributions of ethnography and participant observation to political science research. Together the essays illustrate the particular strengths of ethnography and participant observation as methods that draw researchers "out from behind their desks" and bring them closer to the people, events, processes, and institutions that the discipline seeks to understand. The evidence so produced grounds our theoretical generalizations in the realities of humans' daily lives, and the contributors to this symposium showcase how—specifically—these methods contribute to political science knowledge across subfields, from the American politics of Lipsky's and Brodkin's works to the comparative politics and international relations of the essays in Schatz's.

We present this symposium at what, as editors, we call this *late methodological moment*—a time after the roiling methodological debates occasioned, in part, by: the 1994 publication of King, Keohane and Verba's *Designing Social Inquiry;* the 2000 Perestroika email and ensuing debates (Monroe 2005, Perestroika in Political Science 2010); the 2003 founding of the Qualitative Methods section of APSA; a 2003 *PS* symposium on "Methodological Pluralism in Journals and Graduate Education" that examined the extent of disciplinary pluralism (Bennett et al., Schwartz-Shea); the 2009 publication of Schatz's *Political Ethnography*; and a growing interest in interpretive methods (e.g., over ten years of the Methods Café sessions at WPSA and APSA; see Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2007).

This late methodological moment may be a critical juncture for pluralism in political science. Currently, field experiments and so-called big data collection and analysis are the newest enthusiasms that may increasingly occupy space in graduate curricula and scholarly journals. Those methods, however, institute a methodological distance from human actors that contrasts strikingly with the "closeness" of ethnography and participant observation. Yet even as new generations of scholars *are* employing these latter methods (as this symposium attests), trends within higher education and developments in political science may potentially undermine their practice and legitimacy and, consequently, deter political scientists from conducting and publishing this sort of work as well. Because of their particular strengths, we argue that it is vital for ethnography and participant observation to continually be part of the growing methodological pluralism in the discipline. Below we examine these trends and developments to make clear the specific challenges to conducting immersive field research. Before turning to those challenges,

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we present a brief discussion of the definitions and origins of ethnography and participant observation. In the final section, we review the five essays featured in this symposium; Evelyn Brodkin and Edward Schatz, the senior scholars quoted in our epigraphs, provide contextualizing comments across these essays to wrap up the symposium.

WHAT *IS* THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ETHNOGRAPHY AND PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION?

A detailed history of the use and meaning of these terms is beyond the scope of this introduction, but we can offer a brief review of these here. The two terms are often used interchangeably, along with "fieldwork" or "field research." For example, a symposium in *Qualitative & Multi-Method Research* (2006) entitled "Field Research: How Rich? How Thick? How Participatory?" included references to all of these. As to origins, Salemink suggests that since ethnography was used in colonial times by "[m]issionaries, military explorers, colonial administrators, plantation owners, development workers, counterinsurgency experts, government officials, politicians, [and] indigenous leaders reporting on indigenous peoples," academic anthropology would be better seen "as a specific instance of ethnographic practice than the other way around" (2003, 9). When anthropology split from sociology in the 1930s at the University of Chicago, the former took "ethnography" to designate its method, leaving "field research" and, later, "participant observation" to the latter. In the UK, with its different disciplinary history, the terms are commonly used together, by both disciplines: participant observer ethnography. Disciplinary concerns aside, they designate, in effect, the same set of methods, although not all scholars understand them as equivalent.[1] Within political science's subfields, participant observation is much less used in comparative politics than ethnography and fieldwork, whereas in American politics it has been the more prevalent term. Given this variation, we asked symposium contributors to use the term that reflects their own subfield experiences.

Even as usage may vary, what unites the works in this symposium is these scholars' *intentional immersion* in the life-worlds of those studied (as opposed, e.g., to the artificiality of an experimental lab) in order to access individual and community meanings (what Geertz, 1983, called "experience-near concepts"). For all our contributors, this has meant conducting field research (domestically or overseas) that involved varying degrees of interactions with and observations of those studied. It is the *getting close* to research participants *and* events that produces the evidence that is distinctive from interviews alone and, especially, from more decontextualized forms of evidence-generation such as policy documents, quantitative data sets, and experiments.[2]

In what follows, we will primarily use the term ethnography for two reasons. First, a recent book by Kapiszewski et al. (2015, 8) defines "field research" very broadly as "leaving one's home institution in order to acquire data, information, or insights that significantly inform one's research," an understanding that may include—or may even consist primarily of—methods that do *not* generate data that "gets close" to the populations studied, e.g., a survey.[3] ("Fieldwork," too, may be understood this broadly.) Second, in methods teaching, ethnography is the term that seems to be used most frequently, due in part to the 2009 Schatz book title *Political Ethnography* but also to methods teaching at the very successful Qualitative and Multi-Method Inquiry institutes at Syracuse University as well as various APSA short courses on ethnographic methods.

CHALLENGES TO ETHNOGRAPHY / PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION: HIGHER EDUCATION, IRBS, DA-RT

Although we believe ethnographic research has been developing a strong presence in political science, we briefly review three factors that discourage its use, the first of which is trends in higher education. Political science (and other) departments are often pressured to hire job candidates who will publish quickly and extensively in order to secure tenure. As a result, PhD students are often "normed" since their first days in graduate school to prioritize professional productivity (Schwartz 2014, 517), and this may influence their methodological choices. Ethnographic projects often require practitioners to learn another language, travel to research settings, and spend long periods of time in the field generating data that in turn requires extensive time for analysis. While graduate students have not abandoned ethnography, few will deny feeling pressure to conduct quantitative, large-n research that they can publish more quickly and frequently, making them more "desirable" in a shrinking, competitive job market.

Since non-specialized, non-scholarly administrators may often influence tenure, promotion, and salary decisions, many colleges and universities have grown to rely on quick and visible measures of a scholar's "success," such as quantity of output, to determine her status (Schwartz 2014). For junior scholars who conduct ethnographic research and secure scarce tenure track jobs, the longer time commitments this research method demands often conflict with the "inordinate emphasis on quantity over quality of publications" at elite universities and many state and liberal arts colleges (Schwartz 2014, 518). And for tenured and more senior faculty, continuing (or beginning) time-consuming ethnographically-oriented research projects can clash with the growing demands of teaching, committee work, and other administrative service.

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Despite these challenges, many political science researchers have embraced ethnographic research projects, and they have found many spaces in the scholarly publishing landscape to present this work. The long-form monograph is ideal for publishing research that involves rich, descriptive ethnographic data, which is often more difficult to condense within the strict page limits of many journals. However, while there are many exciting books and book series featuring such ethnographic work, the scholarly book market is also constrained. University libraries are now buying half as many academic books as they did in the 1980s, especially since science journals in particular have consumed ever-larger portions of library budgets formerly spent on humanities and social-science monographs (Lambert 2015). Given these market realities, scholars of all stripes are likely to face high rejection rates at presses. For many junior scholars, the likelihood of such rejection, combined with the need to publish quickly and prolifically, may make the long process of writing a book seem infeasible. Samantha Majic engages these issues in her symposium contribution explaining that despite these constraints, long-form monographs are not the only option for political scientists conducting ethnographic research. She notes that in the wake of the Perestroika debates, journals within and outside of political science are willing to review and publish qualitative, ethnographically-oriented research.

At the same time that trends in higher education put pressure on graduate students to publish and to do so quickly, the second factor, Institutional Review Board review ("the IRB"—US ethics review committees) also dis-incentivizes ethnographic research. As human subjects protection policies have been extended to the social sciences (Schrag 2010), campus IRBs now implement a federal policy originally designed to protect subjects of experimental, medical research. These policies are not well adapted to assessing ethnographic field research projects, which have very different project designs and researcher–subject relationships (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2008). Although there is considerable variation in IRB practices by campus, they remain an additional hurdle for graduate students and faculty seeking to interact with human beings. (It is essential to know that graduate students who try to circumvent IRB review may have their diplomas denied them.)

IRBs can add considerable time to graduate study and faculty research projects (for numerous examples, see Schneider, 2015, Chapter 2). In order to even submit an application, many IRBs require researchers, including students and their supervisors, to pass ethics tests.[4] Also time consuming are the IRB applications themselves, which often force applicants to shoehorn their non-experimental, non-medical research designs into online templates that ask them, for example, to "Describe the inclusion and exclusion criteria for selecting subjects"—as if field researchers had the same power over their research participants as medical and other laboratory researchers. Even more discouraging is the recent effort by some IRBs to require of researchers not only the typical consent process for participants but also *documented* proof of approval from other gatekeepers—from community leaders to authoritarian regimes. Some IRBs are also requiring expert letters attesting to the cultural sensitivity of a researcher's "protocol." (On these latter features, see Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2016). And while there are federal policy "exemptions" for the sorts of methods social scientists use (surveys, interviews, observation), that term means exemption only from "full board review," rather than all other forms of review.

It is unsurprising, then, that IRB practices would discourage ethnographic (as well as interview) research for graduate students and tenure track faculty who require quickly generated publications. IRB review can lead students and faculty to switch their research interests, choosing to work with quantitative data-bases to facilitate faster graduation (which is encouraged by accrediting associations that track departmental statistics on "time to degree") or to secure tenure and/or promotion. There is some empirical evidence that IRB review distorts methodological choices (in Canada, see van den Hoonaard 2011), with ethnography being abandoned most often, especially at the MA level (leading to less experienced doctoral students employing this method). Although changes in the US federal policy regulating research with human subjects are in progress, it is not clear whether the revised rules will mean more timely and appropriate review for ethnographic and other non-experimental forms of research.[5] What is clear is that departments and their senior scholars need to support students in pursuing research that involves interacting with human beings—something essential to the meaning of *social* science—and this support should also apply to students' interactions with IRBs.

The third factor that potentially undermines political scientists' use of ethnographic methods is "DA-RT"—the acronym for "Data Access and Research Transparency." As implemented by a number of journals, this initiative requires scholars not only to cite the data they generate in making claims, but also to provide other scholars with access to these data by depositing them in a "trusted digital repository" (The Journal Editors' Transparency Statement).[6] While few scholars would oppose the general notion of research transparency, increasing numbers of scholars have been voicing concerns about the policy (at the 2015 APSA meetings in San Francisco, there were at least five meetings devoted to DA-RT). On a very basic level, many question the need for it at all, seeing it as a solution in search of a problem (Isaac 2015a, 2015b).

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Although the recent retraction of Green and LeCour's article from the journal *Science* indicated that data fabrication may occur in political science, this is the exception and not the rule. Another level of (DA-RT-like) review seems unnecessary, as most journals already require rigorous peer reviews, at times calling on authors to provide more data to reviewers and, when the paper is accepted and published, making the data available to readers in appendices as needed (Isaac 2015a).

In addition to the fundamental question of its necessity, DA-RT potentially undermines the legitimacy of ethnography and participant observation, the very methods we engage here. As Isaac writes, DA-RT promotes "a resurgent neopositivism within the discipline" (Isaac 2015b, 269). While this vision of political science may hold for many political scientists, it does not represent all political science research, including that practiced by the authors featured in this symposium. DA-RT strongly associates scientific rigor with making data accessible to other researchers, which poses challenges for researchers working with human participants. Although DA-RT's proponents and the APSA guidelines state that scholars may be exempted from DA-RT to address privacy and confidentiality concerns and to comply with relevant and applicable laws (e.g., IRBs; Lupia and Elman 2014), privacy and confidentiality are not ethnographers' only concerns.

One of the unintended consequences of journals adopting DA-RT may be to undermine the growth of ethnographic research by making access more difficult and discouraging scholarly investment in the generation of original ethnographic data. First, ethnographers often devote considerable effort to developing relationships and building trust to gain access to the people they hope to study. (This may even include offering them something in return, such as writing grants for a community organization.) Implicit in the process of establishing research relationships is the idea that only the researcher will have access to the collected data. DA-RT mandates could require scholars to convince research participants to let those data be widely available, in perpetuity, and that may lead them to refuse to participate in the research. Second, DA-RT fails to fully credit the sweat equity[7] of scholars who produce original data. Although the policy allows the scholar sole use of her data for a year, this is but a blink of an eye in the academic life of ethnographers, who commonly draw on the same field research for publications over a 5–7 year period. As the symposium contributions demonstrate, this close-up data plays a valuable role in the creation of disciplinary knowledge; DA-RT's over-emphasis on transparency (as the key to "credibility," Lupia and Elman, 2014, p. 22–23) potentially threatens scholars' ability to generate varied, high quality data.

Despite these three challenges, the symposium essays indicate that such research remains possible, for graduate students and junior faculty alike, *and* beneficial for political science. Because they encourage and, indeed, require researchers to "get close" to the populations studied, ethnography and participant observation provide key evidence that is not accessible by other means. The essays demonstrate this value across subfields.

The essays by Samantha Majic, David Forrest, and James Curry present the kinds of rich data and surprising findings that often arise from ethnographically-oriented research in the US context. Both Majic and Forrest discuss community-based research projects that yielded data that challenge many assumptions about marginalized communities and power relations. Majic presents her research about political activism and public policy related to sex work in the United States. Participating in sex worker-run health service nonprofits in the San Francisco Bay Area, she saw firsthand that, contrary to popular belief, sex workers *do* exercise great personal and political agency, in this case through their day-to-day engagement in peer-based health service provision. Her study also challenged scholarly assumptions that protest politics must be visibly disruptive: by offering nonjudgmental health services to their peers, sex workers show how activists may challenge power relations through more formal nonprofit structures. Additionally, by observing the implementation of sex work-related policies firsthand, through "john schools," Majic was able to see that many policies that are deemed effective (and supportive of gender equality more broadly) are often ineffectual.

In similar ways, David Forrest draws from his own research with anti-poverty community organizations in Minnesota (as well as from a range of other ethnographically oriented political science studies) to demonstrate how political ethnography can challenge two different forms of power, which he labels as calcification (the tendency of political actors and academics to reiterate established terms of political debate) and naturalization (the reinforcement of dominant socio-political arrangements). Although both forms of power limit social movement actors' opportunities to voice opposition and engage in contestation, Forrest argues that ethnographic studies of political life illuminate different perspectives on supposedly "established" terms of debate. In so doing, they highlight shared practices that de-naturalize dominant power arrangements in ways that may *disrupt* those forms of power and foster democratic struggle.

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In contrast to Majic's and Forrest's engagement with community organizations, James Curry's essay considers research on American political institutions. He documents how participant observation and in-depth interviews with political elites declined as the use of quantitative methods in this field of study ascended. Arguing broadly for methodological pluralism, Curry shows that "getting close" to elite political actors and institutions is possible,

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and he provides insights about them that cannot be gained from more distant quantitative measures, such as roll call votes.

Moving outside of the United States, the essays by Susan Kang and by Erica Simmons and Nicholas Smith demonstrate the value of ethnographically-oriented methods for international relations and comparative politics research. Kang's essay discusses her study of international law and the extent to which it is promoted by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in the local context of Seoul, South Korea. By observing and participating in labor protests, she is able to generate data that complicate knowledge of international relations, international law in particular. While more traditional IR research materials such as publicly available documents from the ILO and elite interviews were helpful, they were not sufficient for understanding the local-global interaction in South Korea. Kang's immersion in the South Korean labor movement provided essential data about the "Korean culture of protest," which challenged ILO and government representations of the protests.

Simmons and Smith similarly demonstrate the value of "closeness" for comparative political scientists who engage in qualitative research. Specifically, they encourage researchers to bring an "ethnographic sensibility" to their projects—meaning that researchers attend to how political actors make sense of their worlds so that their meanings can be incorporated into analysis. They argue that this sensibility will strengthen comparative qualitative research by helping scholars recognize the limits of "control" in comparative research design, appreciate how participant meaning enhances comparative analysis, and focus on processes as a locus of comparison. Simmons and Smith's discussion of a Swiss–US study comparing how communities understand ethnic boundaries illustrates the value of this sensibility: actors' understandings of boundaries differ markedly from assumptions in the literature about the primacy of ethnic identity.

In sum, as Brodkin and Schatz observe in the epigraphs with which we began our introduction, getting out from behind our desks—in many topical, geographic, and theoretical areas of study—produces valuable evidence that contributes significantly to political scientists' understandings of the world.

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NOTES

1. Camic and Xie (1994) observe that disciplinary identities rest not only on separate substantive domains, but also on distinct methods. It is such disciplinary differences that may account for the expression of strong views that see them as very different, e.g., https://www.researchgate.net/post/What_is_the_distinction_between_ethnography_and_participant_observation. On sociology's development as a separate discipline, see Breman (2015). For an historical sketch of these two methods terms, see Atkinson and Hammersley (1994), both British sociologists. Delamont (2007) defines ethnography, fieldwork, and participant observation and illustrates and compares the practices in sociology and anthropology.
2. An ethnographic sensibility brought to other forms of evidence such as documents can also allow researchers to tap into the meaning making of those studied. See Jackson (2014) on textual ethnography and, e.g., Hansen (2006) for a constructivist use of documentary and other textual evidence in international relations.
3. Kapiszewski et al. arrive at this broad definition through their survey of political scientists, i.e., how their respondents understood the term "field research." Diana Kapiszewski has regularly taught an APSA short course using the descriptor of "field research."
4. The time spent on such tests, often in the form of multiple choice questions, would arguably be better spent in conversations with other field researchers or supervisors about the actual ethical dilemmas encountered in ethnographic research.
5. On September 8, 2015, the US federal Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP), which oversees IRBs, published a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) suggesting changes to the existing policy and inviting comments on those proposed revisions. The comment period closed in early January 2016 and new rules are expected before the end of the Obama administration.
6. For more details, see DA-RT proponents' Lupia and Elman (2014) rationale; the official DA-RT website (http://www.dartstatement.org/); and a more critically reflective website (https://dialogueondart.org/about/).
7. *"Sweat equity* is the ownership interest, or increase in value, that is created as a direct result of hard work by the owner(s)." (http://www.investopedia.com/terms/s/sweatequity.asp; last accessed April 20, 2016).

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