

Fieldwork Horse-Assery: Making the Most of Feeling Humiliated, Rebuffed, and Offended During Participant Observation Research

Management Communication Quarterly
2014, Vol. 28(3) 458–465
© The Author(s) 2014
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0893318914536965
mcq.sagepub.com


Sarah J. Tracy¹

If you're going to do good fieldwork . . . You have to open yourself up in ways you're not in ordinary life. You have to open yourself up to being snubbed. You have to stop making points to show how "smart-assed" you are . . . Then you have to be willing to be a horse's ass.

—(Goffman, 1989, pp. 127-128)

You have to be willing to look like an idiot—like a horse's ass—to do fieldwork. But it's not *really* that bad. If you're going to be a good field-worker, you must till the land and context, with all the strength, determination, and endurance of a regular old donkey (ass). And, this work is more fruitful and fun if you are not too concerned with looking stupid or obnoxious, like a real (horse's) ass. You can take your *work* seriously but should not take *yourself* too seriously. It's not all work but also field *play* (Tracy, 2013). Good field researchers must leave their ego at the door, be flexible, and learn to fit in. Furthermore, they should not only tolerate moments of humiliation and discomfort but also see them as opportunities for self-reflexivity, examination of tacit assumptions, and transformative resistance.

¹Arizona State University, Tempe, USA

Corresponding Author:

Sarah J. Tracy, The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Arizona State University, P.O. Box 871205, Tempe, AZ, 85287-1205, USA.
Email: Sarah.Tracy@asu.edu

Inspired by Goffman's advice, in this essay, I share tales of fieldwork horse-assery, including embarrassing moments, being snubbed, and encountering objectionable talk and practices. Through reading these stories, field researchers may feel less alone, and people who are not field researchers might better understand the challenges of doing good fieldwork. Furthermore, these stories reveal how flashes of horse-assery can be remarkably insightful.

Embarrassing Moments and Connecting Through Human Vulnerability

If you're spending time in the field, then you will do something, sometime, that is stupid or mortifying. It's important not to worry too much about this. Certainly, I recommend doing your homework, engaging in best practices of systematic research, and so on. That said, being overly sensitive to "looking bad" can stop researchers from asking important questions just because it might result in looking stupid or intrusive. Worrying too much about being an idiot can blind you to the opportunities that human vulnerability can create in relationships.

One of my most embarrassing moments happened right in the middle of 11 months of field research with correctional officers (Tracy, 2005). On this day, I happened to lean down to a low shelf to grab a videotape. When I turned around to face the correctional supervisor I was shadowing, Lt. Bernie Sands, he instantly turned red and began to stammer. I eyed him quizzically and he said, "Uhm, you have a bit of a hole in your pants." What? I stretched my head around, but could not spot anything awry. His reaction, though, convinced me to hurry to the ladies room. There, I learned that this "bit of a hole" meant the entire back seam of my pants had ripped open, camouflaged until I reached down to that bottom shelf. That fateful videotape stretch had revealed a level of research transparency (and Sarah-assery) that was beyond either of our comfort levels.

I considered my options. I really wanted to run far, far away. However, I needed to continue to work closely with Lt. Sands, especially if I were to ever negotiate access to the correctional training materials. After about five minutes of repeating "ohmygodohmygodohmygod" to myself, I side-stepped back to Lt. Sands's office, with my back to the wall, furtively checking to ensure no one was following. I likely appeared to be a well-socialized, paranoid correctional officer with a bad case of Achilles tendonitis. When I arrived back, he and I laughed, and found a sweatshirt to tie around my waist.

Although I would never have planned this fiasco, it ended up bringing Lt. Sands and me closer together as fellow imperfect human beings. I had spent most of my time in the facility gazing upon and analyzing my participants, and in that moment, the roles reversed. It's sometimes easy to forget that

research participants are quite justified for feeling self-conscious and judged by field-workers who are taking notes on their every move. When we as researchers are vulnerable enough to share and laugh off our own shortcomings, this suggests a depth of empathy for others' foibles.

In addition to unpredictable, embarrassing moments, two horse-assery situations are predictable in fieldwork: (a) being snubbed and (b) grappling with how much to "go along" with objectionable practices or talk.

How to Be Resilient in the Face of Snubbing

One of the most difficult parts of doing organizational communication fieldwork is convincing an organization to actually let you in the front door. This is exacerbated if you're trying to study something that might make the organization look bad (e.g., power differences, bullying, discrimination, burnout, social responsibility, or ethical missteps) or examining settings where participants are especially wary of outsiders, such as religious sects, governmental agencies, security organizations, or innovation incubators. Field researchers need to have resilience in the face of participant paranoia, rudeness, or just caution. Take, for example, my first day of correctional officer fieldwork. I had meticulously set up my initial field hours at Nouveau Jail by meeting with multiple gatekeepers and calling to confirm my arrival. Excerpted from my fieldnotes, this is what I faced:

I arrive outside the jail's reception area several minutes before the 7:30 a.m. shift, but the door is locked. I knock loudly, and the woman at the front desk glances at me dismissively. I can just barely hear as she says, "You'll have to wait." I respond with a nervous smile and try to sound professional as I yell through the door, "I have a meeting with Lt. Turner." She responds without looking up, "Lt. Turner won't be here until 9 a.m."

I reply fervently, "I'm scheduled to give a talk during roll call." Without comment, she disappears. Meanwhile, two other civilians have joined me at the entrance. Their friend got arrested last night, and, apparently, they're here to bail him out.

After five long minutes, two sergeants come to the door and crack it open. They look at me skeptically, professing they have no idea who I am. I eagerly explain, and they reluctantly allow me to squeak inside. I glimpse back at the two others still huddled by the door. They scowl at me.

This situation illustrates how field researchers must have patience with a variety of field gatekeepers. It also illustrates the importance of "going with

the flow.” As a result of my delay that morning, I improvised a much-abbreviated introduction. Keeping close fieldnotes on the situation provided insight into the organization’s internal communication (and lack thereof) between different departments and shifts. This instance, coupled with additional data, usefully illustrated why correctional officers often felt less powerful and knowledgeable than the inmates who were privy to information in the institution 24-7 (Tracy, 2005). Being locked out on that first day of research wasn’t exactly enjoyable, but it ended up serving as valuable data.

Relatedly, in fieldwork, negotiating access never stops. Although some people might know about your research, others will not, and even if they do, they will have questions and concerns. For example, in my correctional research I had been granted permission from the jail administrators for “full access.” However, even into my fifth observation, some officers were wary and dismissive (Tracy, 2004), as illustrated by these fieldnotes:

I had hoped by this time that the officers would trust and accept me. Not tonight. Early in the evening, I asked an officer about a form he was filling out. Without meeting my eyes, he jerked his head around to another officer and said, “Is she allowed to see this?” The other officer replied coolly, “I doubt it.”

Feeling the heat of anger and embarrassment crawl up my neck, I said apologetically, “Hey, it’s no big deal” and retreat to my perch on the booking room counter. I console myself that this is a helpful learning experience because it allows me to see what “really happens” in the booking room. However, I feel dismissed and disrespected. I am learning how the officers treat outsiders by being an outsider myself.

This situation illustrates how, even when fieldwork doesn’t go as planned, there is still something to be learned. By taking notes on the way the officers dealt with me as an outsider, I was able to better understand the “us–them” mentality that marked much of the correctional atmosphere.

As illustrated, participant observation requires resilience and flexibility in the face of distrust and snubbing. Of course, this is not always the case. Some research participants enjoy sharing their stories or find researchers to be great distractions. A warm reception is also common if participants initiate or collaborate through action research (e.g., Huffman, 2013).

Dealing With Objectionable Situations

Fieldwork can be uncomfortable for researchers who are easily offended or believe their research participants should act or speak in the same way they do. At the same time, field-workers, like all people, hold a moral code. Here

I share several stories that articulate what field-workers have done in the face of situations they found to be objectionable.

In her airport security research, Shawna Malvini Redden (2013) put her body on the line by enduring upward of 120 enhanced pat-downs from Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officers. Although many of these pat-downs were mundane, some were uncomfortable and even sexually intrusive. Why did she do it? Malvini Redden viewed the pat-downs as a method of resistance and protest to the advanced imaging technology scanner that she found even more revealing and dangerous. Furthermore, this embodied research catalyzed a rich analysis that powerfully illustrates the problems with TSA screening practices. Late into her research, Malvini Redden told agents when pat-downs violated the rules and when certain policies were misapplied. Ultimately, this research not only built theory but also spurred recommendations for improving the TSA.

Issues of sexuality and gender are common threads of potentially objectionable fieldwork. Indeed, this was an issue for me when I lived and worked for 8 months as a junior assistant cruise director on a commercial cruise ship (Tracy, 2009). On the ship, it was normal for male employees to cat-call and physically swat at the female staff—who were referred to as “the girls.” We clad our youthful bodies in suggestive outfits and put them on display to be consumed by the passenger and co-employee gaze—on the deck, beach, stage, and dance floor. As a full research participant and paid employee, I largely bent myself to fit within these norms. My entertainer role included dancing with passengers, enhancing myself with balloons as “Naughty Nurse” for a weekly skit, and telling blue jokes at our “adults only” comedy nights. However, I also made specific decisions of what I would *not* do, such as participating in the “balloon game,” in which passengers straddle a sitting cruise staff member in the quest to pop a balloon that is squeezed between them (Tracy, 2009). I also found small ways to resist, such as playfully referring to male employees as “boys” and correcting those who used “girls” to refer to women.

Interrogating language is a common form of resistance. Rivera (2010) described how she played with language during her fieldwork with Border Patrol Agents:

During my five-hour ride-along with Agent Harley, I consistently used the phrase “undocumented immigrant” rather than the terms used by most Agents, such as “alien” or “illegal.” In the last hour of our time together, Agent Harley used the word “alien,” then paused and asked me, “What’s the word you use?” (pp. 183-184)

In response to this question, Rivera reminded the agent that she used the term, "undocumented immigrants." Agent Harley agreed that he would also use that term from then on. As this situation illustrates, when field-workers encounter something objectionable, they can take it as an opportunity for micro-resistance through language—something Rivera terms “activist interviewing” (p. 184). Indeed, even if we do not take ourselves too seriously during fieldwork, we should take ourselves and our work seriously enough that we notice injustice and consider how our own practices might spur transformation.

Of course, when field-workers encounter issues that seem uncomfortable, another common reaction is to act cooler—more unfazed, naïve, tough, less offended or shocked—than we actually are. In his fieldwork with firefighters, Clifton Scott (2005) found that to maintain trust and camaraderie as “one of the guys,” he would display neutral responses or even laugh at humor he found offensive. Indeed, I have also felt pressures to refrain from making judgments or critiques—something illustrated in the fieldnotes below (Tracy, 2013).

I'm observing the work release unit during shift change, and correctional officer Billy arrives. I remember him from a loud interaction several weeks ago where he joked about wanting to go around and “rattle the cage” of newly booked inmates. I wonder how things will go today. After giving him my informed consent form, Billy says, “Uhh, scary, I'll never sign anything,” and throws it aside. He doesn't ask me to leave, but ignores the consent form and my presence. I feel paralyzed.

Billy goes on about his business, and I bow my head and pretend to doodle. But then, BOOM!! He slams the cupboard next to me. I jump. He chuckles.

He finally turns toward me and begins telling stories about his latest girlfriend. Rubbing his hands together, he says of his upcoming camping plans with her, “I'm going to get some.” Although I am somewhat repulsed, I proceed to engage Billy in a pleasant conversation about camping. Moments later, he signs and returns the informed consent.

In this situation, Billy's “get some” comment framed women as consumable objects. Yet, I felt wary of pointing this out. Although I played along, by taking close notes, I later was able to analytically connect this seemingly off-topic situation to larger gender and power structures in the correctional context.

Dehumanizing and objectifying comments are not only directed toward absent girlfriends but also made in relation to female coworkers and inmates, placing women in a double bind. On one hand, to accept and not interrogate such comments reifies the male as the potent conqueror and the female as passive

victim. However, in a profession where being tough, macho, and hardened serve as badges of belonging, for a woman to act shocked or bothered by sexualized comments is to admit that she cannot “take it” and is indeed different from (and lesser than?) male colleagues. By “going along,” women achieve approval but also condone, acknowledge, and perpetuate men’s position as gatekeepers to the club. (Tracy, 2004, p. 523)

As can be seen in these stories, field researchers can occasionally bump up against some uncomfortable situations. However, if objectionable instances become a pattern, especially if you begin to feel like a sell-out or fraud, it’s time to find a colleague or mentor to talk through potential options and alternatives. You may decide that duplicity in the scene is worth the data it can reveal, especially when researching “up” the hierarchy, such as was the case with Rollins (1985) who went undercover to examine the challenges faced by Black domestic workers. Or, perhaps you can find creative ways to resist, as Rivera (2010) did in her activist interviewing.

If nothing else, it’s crucial to remember that these situations create little data treasures, so TAKE GOOD NOTES (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011)! Feeling surprised or upset suggests something about our reigning assumptions and, in turn, sharply reveals the differing values that govern the research scene. Indeed, embarrassment, objection, and snubbing are not situations to be avoided or simply endured but, instead, are opportunities to connect with our participants, engage in potentially transformative conversations, and access tacit and unarticulated data. Researchers can valuably embrace moments of fieldwork horse-assery.

Acknowledgment

I thank Boris Brummans, Gail Fairhurst, Shiv Ganesh, and Kristen Huffman for their helpful feedback.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. (2011). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

- Goffman, E. (1989). On fieldwork. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 18, 123-132. doi:10.1177/089124189018002001
- Huffman, T. (2013). Pragmatic fieldwork: Qualitative research for creative democracy and social action. *Journal of Social Justice*, 3. Retrieved from <http://www.transformativestudies.org/wp-content/uploads/Pragmatic-Fieldwork.pdf>
- Malvini Redden, S. (2013). *How discourses cast airport security characters: A discourse tracing and qualitative analysis of identity and emotional performances* (Doctoral dissertation, Arizona State University). Retrieved from <http://gradworks.umi.com/35/60/3560328.html>
- Rivera, K. D. (2010). *Emotional labor, dirty work & the face of immigration at the U.S. Border Patrol* (Doctoral dissertation, Arizona State University). Retrieved from <http://gradworks.umi.com/34/25/3425765.html>
- Rollins, J. (1985). *Between women: Domestic workers and their employers*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Scott, C. W. (2005). *The discursive organization of risk and safety: How firefighters manage occupational hazards* (Doctoral dissertation, Arizona State University). Available from ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing. (UMI No. 3166939)
- Tracy, S. J. (2004). The construction of correctional officers: Layers of emotionality behind bars. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10, 509-533.
- Tracy, S. J. (2005). Locking up emotion: Moving beyond dissonance for understanding emotion labor discomfort. *Communication Monographs*, 72, 261-283.
- Tracy, S. J. (2009). Navigating the limits of a smile: Emotion labor and concertive control on a cruise ship. In J. Keyton & P. Shockley-Zalabak (Eds.), *Case studies for organizational communication: Understanding communication processes* (3rd ed., pp. 282-292). Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury Publishing.
- Tracy, S. J. (2013). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

Author Biography

Sarah J. Tracy (PhD, University of Colorado) is professor and director of the Project for Wellness and Work-Life in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University-Tempe.