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# FIELD WORK

An Introduction to the Social Sciences



BUFORD H. JUNKER

*Introduction by*  
EVERETT C. HUGHES

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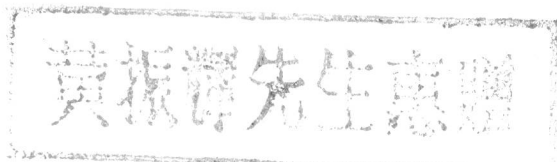


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## INTRODUCTION: THE PLACE OF FIELD WORK IN SOCIAL SCIENCE

Field work refers, in this volume, to observation of people in situ; finding them where they are, staying with them in some role which, while acceptable to them, will allow both intimate observation of certain parts of their behavior, and reporting it in ways useful to social science but not harmful to those observed. It is not easy to find a suitable formula in the best case; it may be impossible in some cases: say, a secret society devoted to crime or revolution or simply espousing "dangerous" ideas. But most people can be studied and most can do more field work than they believe. It is a strenuous, but exciting and satisfying business to expand one's own social perceptions and social knowledge in this way, and to contribute thereby to general social knowledge. Learning to do it—both parts of it, observing and reporting—can have some of the quality of a mild psychoanalysis. But, as in other kinds of self-discovery, one cannot learn more about one's self unless he is honestly willing to see others in a new light, and to learn about them, too.

But perhaps I should say something of the history of the project out of which this volume came. Dr. Junker, a man of much and varied field experience—in Yankee City, in a prison, in southern and midwestern communities, in various professions and institutions, among various racial and ethnic groups, in the United States Army both at home and in Europe—has thought about this subject for a good many years. He has done field work on field work. In 1951 he joined me in a project whose aim was to do just that.<sup>1</sup>

How did I come to initiate such a project? Certainly not because I ever found field observation easy to undertake. Once I start, I am, I believe, not bad at it. But it has always been a torture. Documents are so much easier to approach; one simply blows the dust off them, opens them up, and may have the pleasure of seeing words and thoughts on which no eye has been set these many years. Yet, in every project I have undertaken, studying real estate men, the Catholic labor movement in the Rhineland, and newly

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1. The project was supported from a grant made by the Ford Foundation to the Division of the Social Sciences of the University of Chicago. Professor W. Lloyd Warner and the late Professor Robert Redfield served as advisers.

industrialized towns in Quebec, the time came when I had to desert statistical reports and documents and fare forth to see for myself. It was then that the real learning began, although the knowledge gained in advance was very useful; in fact, it often made possible the conversations which opened the field. One who has some information and asks for more is perhaps less likely to be refused than one who has no advance information; perhaps the best formula is to have advance knowledge, but to let it show only in the kind of questions one asks. But if I have usually been hesitant in entering the field myself and have perhaps walked around the block getting up my courage to knock at doors more often than almost any of my students (I have been doing it longer), I have sent a great many students into the field. Listening to them has given me sympathy with their problems; it has also convinced me that most students can learn to do field observation and will profit from it.

When I came to the University of Chicago in 1938, my colleagues assigned me an introductory course in sociology. It was a course taken mainly by young people who had had two or more years of social science in the College of the University of Chicago. They were probably better read in the social sciences than their peers in any other college on this continent. But many of them had not yet come to that point in education where one sees the connection between small things and great. They liked everything to be great—events as well as ideas. They were inclined to be impatient with the small observations which, accumulated, are the evidence on which theories of culture and society are built. To quite a number of them real life seemed banal, trivial, and often misguided.

I used various devices to get some of the students to collect social data themselves, in the hope that the experience would give them a livelier sense of the problems of gathering social data and turning them, by analysis, into social facts. Eventually I took a bolder step. Since there was no danger that these students would miss adequate exposure to social theories, I, with the approval of my colleagues, replaced the general course with a full term of introduction to field work.

While we never set the form of the course in any inflexible way, there was a general pattern which did not change greatly. Each student, alone or with another, made a series of observations in a Census Tract or other small area of Chicago outside his everyday experience and reported on these observations almost week by week. We discussed the problems the students met in the field. They were asked to notice especially whom they were taken for by people in the areas where they studied and to find an explanation for the peculiar roles attributed to them. When they had done the several assigned kinds of observation, they were asked to draw up a pro-

posal for a study which might be done in such an area, by a person of small resources.

After some years in which nearly all students of sociology, many students of anthropology, and some others went through this experience, I asked for and received a small grant to be used in putting together what we had learned from these several hundred students about the learning and doing of field work and to learn how people of greater experience and sophistication had gone about field observation.

Dr. Junker took charge of the project. Dr. Ray Gold interviewed the current crop of students about their field experiences. Together we held a seminar in which people who had done field observation on a great variety of problems and in many different situations reported on their experiences. A record was kept of their reports. Miss Dorothy Kittel, a bibliographer, helped us in finding documents which reported experiences of people in the field. We put some of the resulting material into a privately circulated document, "Cases on Field Work." What Dr. Junker has put into the present book is in part a more succinct and readable distillate of that volume. But it is more than that. This book has evolved through eight more years of his thought and work.

Those of us who had a part in this project have been strengthened in our conviction that field work is not merely one among several methods of social study but is paramount. It is, more than other methods of study, itself a practice, consciously undertaken, in sociology itself—in the perceiving and predicting of social roles, both one's own and those of others. It consists of exchanges of tentative social gestures, to use the terms of George Herbert Mead. That theme is developed by Dr. Junker. I shall confine myself to some general remarks on the place of field work in the social sciences.

Field work, when mentioned as an activity of social scientists, calls to mind first of all the ethnologist or anthropologist far afield observing and recording the ways, language, artifacts, and physical characteristics of exotic or primitive people. He is presumably there because the people he is interested in have never written down anything about themselves or because, if they do write, they have not had the habit of recording the things the ethnologist wants to know. The early manuals issued to aid ethnologists told the prospective observer what to look for, not how to look for it. Later anthropologists—Malinowski, Margaret Mead, and others—have told of their field experiences in a penetrating way.

Until a generation ago the phrase field work might also have brought to mind what was then called the "social survey." At the turn of the century the social surveyors were going to the slums of the great cities of

Britain and North America to observe the "conditions" in which the new urban industrial poor lived. They then reported them in simple statistical tables on consumption of food and clothing, on wages, housing, illness and crime. But they also described what they found, "fully, freely and bitterly," as Robert E. Park used to say, in the hope that an aroused public would change things. Their work had its journalistic and literary counterpart in "muck-raking." The seventeen volumes of Charles Booth's The Life and Labour of the People of London report several years of observation of the kind known then and for several decades afterwards as "social survey." Among Booth's collaborators were school "visitors," who went from door to door to see conditions and to talk to people. They also visited churches, clubs, public houses, parks, and pawnshops. They got acquainted with the factories, docks, and other places of work of the poor of East London. The work continued for several years; when at last they did the field work for a series of volumes entitled Religious Influences, they described not merely the feeble religious institutions of East London, but also the recreational institutions—including public houses—which seemed to have supplanted the church in the lives of working people. They had become rather more sympathetic reporters than muck-rakers. They had also established a tradition of social observation with two facets: (1) the kinds of data which were thought important to description of the social life of the poor, and (2) a way of gathering them. In North America, the tradition was carried on and developed; the Pittsburgh Survey (Kellogg, 1909-14), reporting the conditions of life and work of immigrant steelworkers, was the most voluminous and notorious of such projects in this country. LePlay, in France, had gone about getting data from families concerning their incomes and expenditures. In all of these enterprises, investigators went among the industrial and urban poor to gather information which was not, at that time, to be found in the censuses taken by public authorities. In many of them, the surveyors were betrayed by their humanity and curiosity into noting other kinds of information, into becoming, in effect, the ethnologists of social classes and other social groups than their own.

For the older social surveys discovered and described customs and institutions as well as opinions. Bosanquet, in the course of surveying the standards of living in London, learned the peculiar functions of the pawnshop among the poor of London.<sup>2</sup> Booth described the institutions of East London and came to the conclusion that no recreational or religious institution could survive there without a subsidy: it might be from gambling or the sale of beer, or it might be subsidy from the middle classes in other

2. Helen D. Bosanquet, The Standard of Life and Other Studies (London: Macmillan & Co., 1895).



parts of town. He also described in detail the habits of drinking, by age and sex, among working people, and came to the conclusion that the sending of children to fetch a bucket of beer for their father's tea did not have the horrible consequences the middle class attributed to it.<sup>3</sup>

Although the surveys were not, in Europe, associated with the name of sociology, in England and America the survey movement became part of the peculiar sociological mix. Social workers, important in the earlier surveys, turned more and more to individual case work and seemed to lose interest in communities, groups, and styles of life. "Professionalized" social work abandoned the social survey for psychiatry, which uses a quite different research role and collects information of a different kind.

The unique thing about the early department of sociology at the University of Chicago was that it brought together Albion W. Small, who was both a devotee of German theoretical sociology and of the American social gospel of reform, and a number of people who were even more closely identified with social surveys, social problems, and social reform. W. I. Thomas, who inspired and carried out the great study of The Polish Peasant in Europe and America with the collaboration of Florian Znaniecki, was following the tradition of the social survey, but he was also leading it in a new direction, that of a more self-conscious and acute theoretical analysis. Robert E. Park, who eventually joined the department, combined even more than the others, the two facets of American sociology. For he had a Heidelberg degree in philosophy, got by writing a theoretical treatise on collective behavior in the crowd and the public.<sup>4</sup> His interest in the behavior of crowds and publics was, however, developed during twelve years of work as a newspaper reporter and city editor. He did more perhaps than any other person to produce the new American sociology in which people went out and did field observations designed to advance theoretical, as well as practical, knowledge of modern, urban society.

Under his influence, and that of his colleagues, hundreds of students of sociology at the University of Chicago went to the field in various areas of Chicago. Their work was co-ordinated, for some years, by Dr. Vivien Palmer, who then published a book on how to do such observation.<sup>5</sup> With

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3. For an account of the further development of the social survey in Great Britain see D. Caradog Jones, Social Surveys (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1949); also his article, "Evolution of the Social Survey in England since Booth," American Journal of Sociology, XLVI, 818-25.

4. Masse und Publikum, eine methodologische und soziologische Untersuchung (Bern, 1904).

5. Field Studies in Sociology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,



the development of better quantitative methods of handling social data, the practice of field work declined. It became known, with a certain condescension, as the "anthropological" method. Eventually the very term "survey" took on a new meaning. "Survey research" now means the study of political or other opinions, including consumers' preferences, by interviewing, with set questions, individuals so chosen as statistically to represent large populations about which the information is wanted. Going to the field means getting out to interview the sample. Some place is given to less formal field observation, but it is called "pilot study" or "exploratory study," and is considered preparatory to the main business of getting a questionnaire on the road. Its aim is to learn how to standardize the questions one wants to ask, not generally to learn what questions to ask. Great ingenuity is sometimes shown in such exploration and pretesting, but it is usually done with a certain impatience, since it delays the real work of "administering" the questionnaire. Once the questionnaire is settled upon, any doubts about the questions must be explained away, as it is too expensive and too disturbing to change anything at that point. The survey research of today, valuable as it is, conceives of field observation in quite a different way from that presented in this book.

For one thing, the sample survey still must work on the assumption that some very large population speaks so nearly the same language, both in letter and figure of speech, that the differences in answers will not be due in significant degree to differences in the meaning of words in the questions. This is a condition hard to meet even in Western literate countries: in many parts of the world, it cannot be met at all. The survey method, in this new sense of the term, must work with small variation in the midst of great bodies of common social definition. The preparatory field work is used to determine the limits of common meaning within which one can conduct the survey. Very often, groups of people not in the common social world have to be left out of consideration. In this country many surveys omit Negroes and other "deviant" groups. It is part of the merit of field work of the kind we are discussing in this book that it does not have to limit itself to minor variations of behavior within large homogeneous populations. But even within such populations, field observation is more than a preparatory step for large statistical surveys. It is an ongoing part of social science. Most surveys, again in the new sense, would be much more useful if they were followed by even more intensive field work than that which precedes them. There is a tendency for the statistical concen-

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1928).

The Webbs wrote a classic in this field under the title, Methods of Social Study (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1932).

trations and relationships found in a questionnaire survey to be explained in a text which merely presents alternative speculations. It is at that point that good field work, instead of getting "soft" data, would give firmer stuff. In fact, this is what was done in a recent study of anxiety among college professors.<sup>6</sup> A field team followed the interviewers. The social science of today requires, in fact, a great many arts of observation and analysis. Field observation is one of them.

There were some important differences between the field work of the ethnologists and that of the sociologists who followed the tradition of the social survey. The ethnologist was always an exotic to the people he studied; clearly a stranger in every way except his humanity, and perhaps he had to establish even that. The sociologist observed and reported upon a segment of his own world, albeit a poverty-stricken and socially powerless one. He was usually a class stranger to the people he studied; often, in some measure, an ethnic, religious, or racial stranger. Still, he was among people of kinds whom he might see any day in public places and who might read the same newspaper as himself. In due time, some of the sociologists themselves came from the segments of society which had been, or still were, objects of study and began to report on the very minorities—racial, sectarian, ethnic—of which they were members. The sociologist came to be less and less a stranger studying strangers and reporting to still other strangers. Student, object of study, and member of audience for the study tended to overlap and merge more and more. The sociologist was now reporting observations made, not as a complete stranger, but in some measure as a member of an in-group, although, of course, the member becomes something of a stranger in the very act of objectifying and reporting his experiences.

The unending dialectic between the role of member (participant) and stranger (observer and reporter) is essential to the very concept of field work. It is hard to be both at the same time. One solution is to separate them in time. One reports, years later and when one is at a distance in mind and spirit, what he remembers of social experiences in which he was a full participant.

It is doubtful whether one can become a good social reporter unless he has been able to look, in a reporting mood, at the social world in which he was reared. On the other hand, a person cannot make a career out of the

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6. Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Wagner Thielens, Jr., *The Academic Mind: Social Scientists in a Time of Crisis* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1958), with a field report by David Riesman.

reporting of reminiscences unless he is so far alienated from his own background as to be able to expose and exploit it before some new world with which he now identifies himself. One has to learn to get new data and to get them in a great variety of settings as demanded by new problems he wants to solve. Other ways of solving this dialectic include being a part-time participant and part-time reporter, privately participant and publicly reporter, or publicly participant and secretly reporter. All these are practiced. All have their moral, personal, and scientific pitfalls. But the dialectic is never fully resolved, for to do good social observation one has to be close to people living their lives and must be himself living his life and must also report. The problem of maintaining good balance between these roles lies at the very heart of sociology, and indeed of all social science.

Each of the two disciplines, anthropology and sociology, which have made most use of field work, has its own history. In each, the field situation has tended to be different from that of the other. The ethnologist reported upon a whole community; the sociologist generally observed and reported only upon people of some segment, usually a poor and socially powerless one, of a community. In due time, it came about that some of the sociologists themselves came from odd and less-known corners of society or from minorities and began to report upon their own people to their new associates in the academic and larger society. This introduced a new element of distinction from the older ethnology. For the sociologist was now reporting upon observations made, not in the role of the stranger, but as a full member of the little world he reported on. He observed as a member of an in-group but, in the act of objectifying and reporting his experience, became of necessity a sort of outsider.

As one reads into the analyses and the documents included herein, he will see the meaning of this. For it comes out clearly, I believe, that the situations and circumstances in which field observation of human behavior is done are so various that no manual of detailed rules would serve; it is perhaps less clear, but equally true, that the basic problems are the same in all situations. It is the discovery of this likeness inside the shell of variety that is perhaps the greatest and most important step in learning to be an effective and versatile observer.

In the foregoing I have said nothing about the logic of field observation in social science. One reason I have not done so up to this point is that I wanted to emphasize that the departments of social science are as much historic institutions as logical divisions. Each one is the product either of social movements inside the academic world or of movements outside which later got into the academic world. While some of the departments have or claim a peculiar subject matter which sets them off from the

others, this subject matter is perhaps more often a product of history, become convention and prerogative, than of pure logic. One might imagine a university in which there would be no divisions of subject matter except those dictated by clear differences of method. Economists would study all phenomena which could profitably be studied by the methods developed for analysis of the behavior of men playing the game of maximizing their share of scarce, but desired, goods. Some other branch would study all phenomena which yield well to analyses based upon skilled observation of power relations among men, and so on. I think it is obvious that this is not the situation at present. Each branch of social science appears to be some mixture of a concern with a basic logic or method with a somewhat monopolistic and jealous concern with some set of institutions or practical problems.

One should add that each, whatever its basic logic or method, has its favorite kinds of data. The historian loves to get his hands on a manuscript that no one has seen before. He wants to sit down in a quiet and musty corner of the archives and copy out parts of it by hand. He is preoccupied with manuscripts and prides himself on his skill in reading both the lines and what is between the lines. The political scientist shares this interest or preoccupation somewhat, with the variation that he especially loves a secret rather than a merely rare document. The psychologist has, more than others engaged in the study of social behavior, set himself the model of the natural scientist making stylized observations in a prepared situation, that is, in a laboratory. The economist and some sociologists like to get their data already in quantitative form and in massive numbers. Their love is the manipulation of such data to create situations with a maximum of chance and then to discover departures from it.

Now there may be some relation between the number of possible fruitful kinds of data and ways of getting and handling them and the number of departments of social science in an American university, but I doubt it. We may discover in due time that there are only a few basic ways of getting human data and a few basic skills for analyzing them. While it may for a long time be true that the departments will be distinguished more by their preoccupations than by their method, conceived in terms of pure logic, it may also be that we can sort out these basic skills of observation and analysis and work on them irrespective of conventional disciplinary lines.

One of these areas of skill will be that of observing and recording the behavior of human beings "on the hoof." Men deposit some of their thoughts and actions in artifacts and documents which historians learn to read with consummate skill. Some of their actions yield to analysis of small items of behavior recorded in astronomical numbers of cases. But others, I am

convinced, yield only to close observation at the time, observation sometimes of the passive bystander, sometimes of the active participant, sometimes of the active intervener, as in the case of the group experimenter and of the psychoanalyst who rends painful hidden memories from the unwilling patient. It is observation "on the hoof" that we refer to as field observation.

It is a method increasingly used by students of many modern institutions (unions, industries, hospitals, armies) as well as by students of communities, near or far from home. The outstanding peculiarity of this method is that the observer, in greater or less degree, is caught up in the very web of social interaction which he observes, analyzes, and reports. Even if he observes through a peephole, he plays a role: that of spy. And when he reports his observations made thus he becomes a kind of informer. If he observes in the role of a member of the group, he may be considered a traitor the moment he reports. Even the historian, who works upon documents, gets caught in a role problem when he reports, unless there is no person alive who might identify himself with the people or social group concerned. The hatred occasionally visited upon the debunking historian is visited almost daily upon the person who reports on the behavior of people he has lived among; and it is not so much the writing of the report, as the very act of thinking in such objective terms that disturbs the people observed. It is a violation of apparently shared secrets and sentiments. The reader will see that in the discussions and documents which follow we have all become very much occupied with the dimensions of this problem, of the on-going social and personal dilemmas of the man who observes and analyzes, more than is necessary for survival and good participation, the behavior of people about him and reports it to some audience.

The usefulness of field observation is not confined to one institution or aspect of life—religious conduct, economic, familial, political, or any other institutional aspect of behavior will yield in some measure to field observation. Insofar as it does, the observer, no matter what his formal field or academic fraternity, will share problems of skill, role, and ethic with all others who use the method. The aim of the project from which this book grew was not to sell this idea to people in sociology or in other fields, but to assemble what knowledge and insight we could on problems of learning and using the method of field observation, without limiting ourselves to any conventional confines.

If there is any sense in which field method is peculiarly sociological it is in this. If sociology is conceived as the science of social interaction and of the cultural and institutional results of interaction (which become factors conditioning future interaction), then field observation is applied

sociology. Insofar as the field observer becomes a conscious observer and analyst of himself in the role of observer, he becomes also a pure sociologist. For the concepts which he will need for this observation of the observer are the very concepts needed for analysis of any social interaction. The very difficulties of carrying out field observation—the resistance of his subjects, the danger that his very success as a participant may later prevent him from full reporting, even the experience of getting thrown out of town—are facts to be analyzed sociologically. It was the realization of these points that made our little research group exclaim one day, almost as one man, "We are studying the sociology of sociology."

This has a peculiar corollary. The problem of learning to be a field observer is like the problem of learning to live in society. It is the problem of making enough good guesses from previous experience so that one can get into a social situation in which to get more knowledge and experience to enable him to make more good guesses to get into a better situation, *ad infinitum*.

The problem of any field observer is to learn how he, even he, can keep expanding this series as long as possible and in what situations he can do so. The part of theoretical analysis and the part of insightful experience, and the relation of the two to each other, are, in a sense, what we set out to discover.

EVERETT C. HUGHES

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The reader will find, in the several chapters and the Selected Bibliography, other acknowledgments—to authors and publishers, to university and foundation support of field work, including field work on field workers, and to a number of my own principal teachers and colleagues, including especially students.

To all of these, named and anonymous, and to my wife, my many thanks for their encouragement, stimulation, and very effective help.



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## THE MEANING OF FIELD WORK

Field work for a social science—one concerned with learning first-hand from living people about themselves and their society—is in itself an application of that science. Field work viewed as applied sociology, for example, provides one way to learn what sociology is about and what it means in its simplest and most vital terms.

The student, after his first interview for a social science purpose and as he writes a full and free account of what occurred (not merely what was said, verbatim, and done, in context, by both participants, but also what seemed to be felt and implied), will come to realize that for him in some sense and even for others, perhaps, the single interview illuminates what society is, in microcosm.<sup>1</sup> He has available for study and reflection leading to his further development, intellectual and otherwise, a report of an instance of interaction in a certain period of time in a given setting in which he and another person created a learning situation for each other and accomplished some kind and amount of communication of information that may be relevant to the knowledge sought by a social science. He can henceforth engage himself actively in the endless interplay between concept and percept, percept and concept, and so on, which make up and sustain what is known about man as a social animal.

Field work, as practiced occasionally or routinely in education, social work, and other enterprises involving human relations in applied fields, is distinguished by a less direct concern for its contributions to knowledge and a more immediate concern for changing people or their situations or both. In certain kinds of action research, there may occur applications of social science at two levels, sometimes almost simultaneously: (1) at the level of discovering and helping to define the nature and rate of changes desired by the people in the situation; (2) at the level of participating with the people to assist them in making changes. Such field work may be supplemented by the kind of field work with which this book is largely concerned, but the distinction is worth making if only because there may be a serious underlying difference in attitude towards "the facts." If one is primarily concerned to change the latter, his interest may contaminate his

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1. See *Selected Bibliography*, Part III, D-4 (The Interview), especially Riesman and Benney (eds.) (September, 1956).