

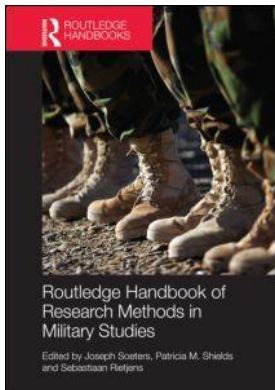
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10

BEING ONE OF THE GUYS OR THE FLY ON THE WALL?

Participant observation
of veteran bikers

René Moelker

René Moelker (2014) *Riding with Veterans*. Berlin: Springer.

The aim of this study into veterans who ride motorcycles is to gain knowledge and understanding about the healing effect of riding. What is it that helps veterans cope better with experiences from the past by involving in an activity that in fact is somewhat dangerous, which sometimes is not understood in wider society and which always implies the presence of other bikers. Narratives can illustrate why veterans connect their battle or conflict experiences with riding a motorcycle.

Joop van de Vijver, 87 years old, is the oldest participant on the Veterans Ride to The Hague. During WWII in Indonesia he fought the Japanese. Joop was an orderly in 1942 and thus was supposed to deliver messages by motorcycle. The motorcycle saved his life in the quaintest way. He got into an accident. He drove his bike into a ditch and landed in hospital and whilst he was being treated for his injuries the Japanese lured the rest of his battalion into an ambush. He said 'They have been slaughtered! The Japanese killed my whole platoon. Because of my accident I survived. The others, all of them my own age, they have all been knifed or shot down.'

The objective of the study was to learn from people like Joop van de Vijver how veterans cope and deal with their conflict experiences and to learn about the role the motorcycle played as an instrument of obtaining societal recognition and social support. The researchers compared narratives from American and European veterans in order to learn about the genesis of veteran culture. The findings point to brotherhood and *communitas* working as a stress release, whilst riding itself has some elements of pilgrimage in it that are healing. The almost holy destination of a ride, often being a place of worship like the Wall in Washington, DC, during Memorial Day or of joyous celebration like Veterans Day in The Hague, makes it worth their while to meet, travel and communicate

with each other while the recognition that wider society bestows on the veteran bikers feels like a successful second homecoming.

Participant observation as a general method proved to work well in order to understand the processes under study. The difficulties experienced were related to obtaining organizational entry, winning trust, and balancing involvement and detachment. In this connection, informed consent and member checks proved to be highly important. Without these research practices the study would have been doomed to fail. Remarkable is the use of unusual artefacts as research instrument, referring to the motorcycle that became integral part of the heuristic strategy.

Introduction: Out of the cold, into the frying pan

It is freaking cold, not freezing, but even when dressed for extreme weather, the wind chill factor and the humidity of the Dutch climate causes the cold to penetrate into the bones. After a ride, merely 65 miles, everything aches, bodies are shivering, hands no longer function well and handling brakes and clutch is getting troublesome. It is getting real dangerous. Why go motorcycling this early in spring? What nutter thought this up? Tension is rising as we reach our destination. It is dark and the last ten miles take the bike along local roads. The last road is narrow, no lampposts, lightning, and not even moonlight on this particular night in the countryside. We are afraid. If they mean us wrong there is no way out, no people to assist us, only our wits to put trust in. Our first visit to a Motorcycle Club (MC), whose members participated in post-conflict situations as military veterans, proves memorable. The participant observers enter a scene that seemingly resembles an episode of the *Sons of Anarchy* series.

No textbook on research methodology can help us now. The first and only relevant question at this stage is winning trust. Getting the proverbial foot into the door and to continue from that point on. We did have a topic list of questions and an overarching objective to the study. And we did have a predesigned methodology that we coined *kinetic ethnography*, but winning trust was essential to everything that followed. Winning trust could gain us knowledge nobody else could obtain by other means, but it also lured us into the classic problem of participant observation, the problem of involvement and detachment (Elias 2007). Are the researchers ‘only a fly on the wall’ or do they gain trust by being ‘one of the guys’?

In this chapter the methodology of *kinetic ethnography* is elaborated upon; problems with the balance in involvement and detachment are discussed and the specifics of participant observation like obtaining entry, interviewing, taking (mental) field notes, sense-making and informed consent are dealt with.

Kinetic ethnography and the study of liminality

Paul Willis (2010) defines ethnography in the most clear and simple manner: “‘Ethno’ is people, ‘graphy’ is writing, so ethnography is writing about people.” But ethnography in itself does not suffice to study groups that are in a transitional phase and can be characterized by high mobility and transformation. Veteran biker groups are defined by closure towards ‘normal’ citizens and the non-veteran-biker community, i.e. those ‘who would not understand’. Outsiders are often and most significantly called ‘civilians’. Veteran bikers feel they are different because of past experiences in war zones and the common feeling they share of being rejected by wider society

as both a veteran and a biker, and therefore these groups feel vulnerable. Mobility, closure and the vulnerability of these groups, makes it difficult to win trust other than by partly participating in their life style and engage in participant observation using ethnographic methods. Therefore kinetic ethnography, i.e. ethnography on the move, emerged.

Evidently, motorcycling veterans are studied mainly when they are on the move. Earlier on, Michalowski and Dubish (2001) undertook the task of developing kinetic ethnography. They based their work on Turner and Turner's (1978) seminal studies of liminality and pilgrimage, studies where the mobility of the 'respondents' constitutes the most dominant characteristic. The very concept of liminality is inherently motored by kinetics, because it is all about transitory phases and 'spaces in between'. In *Liminality and Communitas*, Turner (1969: 95) defines liminal individuals or groups as:

neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony.

In this study liminality will apply to voyaging towards a destination with a sacred character even when the 'sacred' destination in fact has no relationship with religion and sense-making is an immanent enterprise. Within a liminal period different rules apply and the group of travellers develops its own temporal norms and values that can depart from society's accepted civilian norms. In fact the travellers develop a sense of *communitas* that sets them apart as 'outsiders' from the 'established' (Elias and Scotson 2008). Thus Coleman and Eade (2004: 3) state that sacred journeys are productive of social groupings: 'The Turnerian notion of pilgrimage as a liminoid' phenomenon . . . is productive of social encounters without hierarchical constraints.' After the voyage and when reintegration in society is successful the traveller might experience that (s)he has undergone a transformation. Travelling normally broadens the mind, but travelling as a part of an existential journey changes conceptions of meaning and sense-making shedding everyday life in a different light. It also changes the participant observer.

Kinetic ethnography requires that the demarcation line between involvement and detachment be crossed by being liminal yourself, by participation in what goes on. Kinetic ethnography requires the ethnographer to be on the move, and to undertake the journey him/herself. The ethnographer is not necessarily a member, nor a veteran, and that is why detached observation is possible despite the high level of involvement. But it is a subjective process because the ethnographer him/herself is also changed by the experience of journeying. Kinetic ethnography is the only possibility to deploy empathy that is required in order to understanding the meaning that bikers give to their quest.

The rides have a special character. The destination is sacral even if it is secular in origin. A war memorial or battlefield tour as destination certainly is sacral even if it is not at all religious. One of the road trips has 'the Wall', the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, as its destination and Coleman and Eade (2004: 21) refer to this place as 'one of America's most prominent shrines'. Winkelmann and Dubisch (2005: XV) named these road trips 'secular pilgrimages'. Preceding Memorial Day, where during 'Rolling Thunder' the veteran bikers are greeted by 900,000 spectators, the *Run for the Wall* forms a cross-nation motorcycle pilgrimage towards this destination in Washington DC. A Dutch – small – nexus to this motorcycle pilgrimage is the road trip heading for Lourdes. Even though it cannot be compared regarding size, the impact and mechanisms at work are the same as the ride to Washington DC. This motorcycle road trip is small but it is embedded in a large international military pilgrimage of mainly disabled veterans who seek healing at the holy places in this city.

These methodological reflections on kinetic ethnography lead to special research tools, i.e. the researcher him/herself, the motorcycle, observation during rides and the campfire interview protocol. But the first task of the researcher is obtaining entry.

Out of the frying pan into the fire

Winning the trust of bikers sometimes was dead easy, and sometimes it felt like entering a snake pit. All veterans share the need to narrate (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011) and to (re)construct a healing identity when the original narrative has been broken (McAdams 1996) by the course of events in war ridden places or by the not always warm welcome upon return from mission. That is why a listening ear is often very welcome, although the interviewer must be wary for the bias that comes along this need to narrate . . . i.e. the fact that reconstructing identities and presenting narratives is not the same as truth telling or factual and objective reporting.

Obtaining entry proved unexpectedly easy when the interviewer in the United States joined the *Run for the Wall*, a ride with Vietnam Vets from Los Angeles to Washington DC. The researcher only needed five minutes to explain the objective of the study, after which he was welcomed by the platoon leader:

hey guys, listen out, René is going to participate and ask some questions. He came all the way from Holland to write a book on the Run for the Wall.

After this introduction the interviewer put up his tent, camped with the Vets, was invited to the diner hall where the local community in pilgrimage fashion had provided free dinner for 500 bikers. In merely five minutes the interviewer was one of the guys; moreover, the interviewer was ascribed high status, as illustrated by the following quote given by an anonymous biker:

Hey René . . . can I have a photo taken with you! You came all the way from Holland just to be with us. That is so cool.

By way of contrast, in the Netherlands entering the clubhouse of the Veterans MC did not quite evoke warm feelings of the welcoming kind. Upon introduction, one normally gives the bikers-handshake, but the female co-researcher was not even given a normal handshake, which seemed the summit of impoliteness. Later the bikers explained this was normal, because they were not sure if the female was someone's 'ol' lady'. And you don't exchange pleasantries with another man's 'ol' lady'. So in fact, from their perspective they were being polite, but we missed it being unfamiliar with MC customs!

The interviewers had themselves to blame for starting out on the wrong foot and should have known better. There was a reason for this difficult start. The political situation at that time implied that all MCs were haunted by being affiliated with *Business Clubs*² like Hells Angels (HA) and Satudarah (a rivalling Business Club that is supposed to be in contact with HA arch enemies, the Bandidos). Even though the police never produced anything but circumstantial evidence (Dienst Nationale Recherche, 2010), headlines in newspapers shouted 'war is coming' and MC members were severely scrutinized, telephones tapped, and rallies were cancelled on the order of local authorities. Therefore the Veterans MC did not trust the researchers from the 'establishment', the Netherlands Military Academy. But even so, they wanted to hear us out. To our surprise the secretary of the Veterans MC had checked out the research proposal that was published on the academy's website, in the official Academy's Annual Research Plan. His comment was as follows:

Was it The Hague [the MOD] that assigned this study into MCs? Why do you want to know about us? In your research proposal you mention the term ‘mal-adaption’, what do you mean by that? And besides, what if we allow you to talk to us, what’s in it for us?

The secretary was right in being suspicious. The term ‘mal-adaption’ was derived from stress-theory, and whilst quite common as a theoretical concept, it tapped into the idea that this was yet another stereotyping study into the derailed veteran who after feeling rejected by society turns to crime, madness and violence. Veterans in general dislike this kind of stereotyping, and the secretary was no exception. We had, even before the study started, projected a concept unto our subjects that already was a conclusion, and by his critical question the secretary pointed us to aspects of our study that were presumptuous and demeaning to our subjects. We were allowed access to the field and invited to the international Brothers in Arms Rally but we were more or less on probation.

The answer to the question ‘what is in it for us’ did finally gain us entry to the field and helped to win trust. The study led to positive publicity and positive image building. We helped organize a Netherlands Veterans Rally with destination The Hague that very much contributed to the positive publicity. Second, collaboration benefited individual bikers who were key actors in the MC. The study brought them into contact with people in high places who not only contributed to emancipation of the group but who also satisfied individual needs for recognition. A number of MC members got in touch with the Prince of Orange as well as shaking hands with the Commander in Chief. The secretary of the MC was awarded the insignia ‘Wounded but not Vanquished’, a highly valued insignia because it acknowledges his PTSD to be caused by the working conditions in the conflict area, from the hands of the Lieutenant-General of Veterans personally. Without this study he would not have the social network to start the application procedure for acquiring this insignia. Moreover he would perhaps never have thought this was feasible. Motorcycle groups and individuals gained respectability thanks to this study. The researchers nowadays are welcome at biker events.

The campfire interview protocol

When one gets to these destinations, it is impossible to take out a survey form that people can fill in. Bikers don’t respond well to quantitative methods and distrust them as they are probably submitted in service of ‘the man’, i.e. governmental bureaucracy. Imagine some of those ZZ-top bearded guys jotting down their thoughts and answers on a piece of paper complying with official requests by Armed Forces scholars! It wouldn’t happen!

Observations and interviews were taken wherever possible. On parking lots (the one at the Pentagon held 1 million roaring bikes), during refuelling, in club houses, in churches, schools, hospitals, memorial sites, biker rallies, camping sites and in private homes. Sometimes tapes held additional noise of thundering engines. The protocol therefore contained questions regarding military life events, motivation and motorcycling. Each question had a deeper motive. For example the question ‘how long and why have you been a member of a motorcycle group’ was designed to get grip on the Turnerian theoretical concept of ‘communitas’ and bonding between veterans. The very simple question ‘why do you ride motorcycles’ was connected to the healing and psychological side of the narrative. We knew from test interviews that these questions would work well. One question in particular, the question what bikers thought of the ‘1%’ insignia, was intended to reveal the meanings attached to symbols and to determine the place of self in the wider symbolic universe. This question proved a core question in our attempt to understand, *Verstehen*, the bikers and therefore it will be elaborated in one of the later

sections. The questions were formulated as simple as possible, because we knew in advance we would be working in informal and sometimes noisy surroundings.

Field notes under ‘hot’ conditions

‘In a way, your research journal will become the centre of gravity of your whole project’ (Zemliansky 2012). In this journal the researcher can note down interview and research questions, descriptions of artefacts, notes to self, ideal, searchlight hypothesis as well as meta-cognitive reflections. One can make use of electronic recording devices, immediate typing keywords into a computer, or a simple notebook. In special situations one can use whatever one can find to make field notes. If in a bar, write on a coaster. Later the notes can be analysed. Interview protocols can be transcribed and coded. Interviewees can be committed by sending them the protocol and ask them to approve of the text. This procedure, the member check, is very helpful and serves many purposes besides upping the validity of the study, as we will discuss in subsequent sections.

All of the above helps organizing and analysing the data and it sounds pretty straightforward, but alas, it is not. The most difficult thing is when organizational entry is difficult to beget and consent for the interview is not (yet) given. This was the situation we were in whilst trying to gain entry and at the same time interviewing the board members of the Veterans MC. The first acquaintance startled and confused the researchers and the welcome resulted in ‘hot’ interviewing conditions. Whilst one of the researchers had a hard time defending the rationale of the study and was verbally under fire, the other researcher observed and made mental field notes that she was able to retrieve from memory immediately the next day. In this stressful situation the researchers were fortunate to be working as a duo, otherwise no field notes would have been made. After becoming friends, and gaining trust and entry, the Veterans MC did not object to publication of the findings from this memorable evening.

The balance between involvement and detachment

The ethnographer needs to be involved personally in order to use participant observation, whilst maintaining an adequate balance of involvement and detachment (Elias 2007). According Norbert Elias the balance should be respected because:

scientists have learned that any direct encroachment upon their work by short-term interests or needs of specific persons or groups is liable to jeopardize the usefulness which their work may have in the end for themselves or for their own group.

(Ibid.: 72)

One needs a detached position in order not to blur observations by one’s own Maslovian hierarchy of needs. When one needs something, when interest is at stake, this will taint all observations. Elias himself explains in a very straightforward example:

a philosopher once said, ‘If Paul speaks of Peter he tells us more about Paul than about Peter.’ One can say, by way of comment, that in speaking of Peter he is always telling us something about himself as well as about Peter. One would call his approach ‘involved’ as long as his own characteristics, the characteristics of the perceiver, overshadow those of the perceived. If Paul’s propositions begin to tell more about Peter than about himself the balance begins to turn in favour of detachment.

(Ibid.: 69)

In the social sciences it is more difficult to detach oneself, because ‘objects’ are also ‘subjects’ (ibid.: 79). In ethnography the problem is even more acute because the researcher uses his body as an instrument, as a research tool; thus the investigators themselves are, as a rule, directly involved in the problems they study. In *kinetic ethnography* the researcher is interested in the preferred cultural items of a group. In the veterans study the motorcycle was both a research tool and the cultural artefact under study, thereby thriving on the homology of the man–machine interface. Homology implies that the production of cultural meaning, identity and behaviours of people is affected by the artefacts they utilize. Thus, biker culture is just as much formed by bikers as by bikes. Paul Willis, who wrote extensively on motorcycle culture (Willis 1978: 189–203; 2010),³ explains that ethnography depends on bodily engagement:

When I developed a particular cultural studies approach to human meaning making, I felt I had to be in the situation where I had to use my own body, my own presence, my own sensibility, to understand how other people were making sense of their worlds thru their cultural engagements . . . the whole point of ethnography is that you use the (your) human body as your research instrument. You put yourself in the same situation as those human agents . . . to read from that the similar processes of meaning in other people . . . I stress the materiality of culture.

(Willis 2010)

The homological level is one of three levels of sociocultural analysis that Willis distinguishes.⁴ It focuses on the production of meaning by the interaction with material objects, cultural items that are bestowed with meaning. According to Willis:

the bike itself came into a homological relation with the bike boys in Birmingham, where they argued that a certain kind of masculinity, sense of confidence in the world, and style was reflected in the motorbike, and that over time the boys changed this cultural item the more to reflect their own sense of identity. They took of the straight handlebars that you normally have, so that you would get down low on the bike, to lower wind resistance and you can go faster . . . They put cattle horn handles on the bike that resulted in far more wind resistance, but it gave a distinct style of riding, that helped to hold their identity. They took the baffles out of the exhaust, why? To make the exhaust louder, so that the bike roared and frightened people, rather than having a bike that purred through the grey surroundings of the urban city. All changes to hold their sense of identity. Through the ethnographic method, observing the way they changed the bike in order to express them selves, I argued a distinct motorbike identity and cultural relationship was formed. I think we can take any cultural item, music, car, etcetera, and look at the way it is connected to human activity and human praxis, all these things are in a dialectic about how to develop an identity.

(Willis 2010)

On the one hand, the balance between involvement and detachment is somewhat tilted towards involvement, because it would first of all be difficult to gain organizational entry, but second, if it were not tilted it would not be possible to learn about the process of meaning making. You don’t have to be a biker to understand why bikers act like they do. But you do have to put yourself physically in the material situation the group under study is in, and be willing to use your own body as research tool. If you want to practice kinetic ethnography, be ready to be on

Table 10.1 Participant observation type chart (Spradley 1980)

Type of participant observation	Level of involvement	Limitations
Non-Participatory	No contact with population or field of study	Unable to build rapport or ask questions as new information comes up.
Passive Participation	Researcher is only in the bystander role	Limits ability to establish rapport and immersing oneself in the field.
Moderate Participation	Researcher maintains a balance between 'insider' and 'outsider' roles	This allows a good combination of involvement and necessary detachment to remain objective.
Active Participation	Researcher becomes a member of the group by fully embracing skills and customs for the sake of complete comprehension	This method permits the researcher to become more involved in the population. There is a risk of 'going native' as the researcher strives for an in-depth understanding of the population studied.
Complete Participation	Researcher is completely integrated in population of study beforehand (i.e. he or she is already a member of particular population studied)	There is the risk of losing all levels of objectivity, thus risking what is analysed and presented to the public.

the move just like your respondents are. You need to be 'talking the talk' and 'walking the walk' (DeWalt and Dewalt 2011: 56–60). On the other hand over-involvement can blur observations tremendously. Complete participation, complete integration, is not prerequisite for comprehension of the groups under study. Table 10.1 provides an overview of various types of participant observation, including corresponding limitations.

The study among veteran bikers is an example of rather active participation; touring with the veterans the researcher – with his bike (!) – became virtually part of the group. Claude Weber's ethnographic study (2012) among cadet-officers at the French military academy in Saint-Cyr is an example of passive participation, as this lecturer could never be a member of the group of cadets that he studied. However, over a number of years he attended many meetings, ceremonies and other social events and he developed close ties with the cadets through intensive interviewing and informal talks. This made him a bit of an insider, as through this intensive presence passive participation turned into moderate participation.

Thick description and the '1%' question

The method in use is modelled on Max Weber's heuristic concept of *sinnhaft verstehen* (1985: 427–432) that has culture as its objective and culture all revolves around meaning. Webers' work inspired Geertz (1973: 5) to one of the most quoted definitions of culture.

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.

To grasp meaning one should, according Geertz, apply ‘*thick description*’, wherein:

lies the object of ethnography: a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures. (ibid. 7) . . . What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to . . . we are explicating: and worse, explicating explications.

(Ibid.: 9)

Verstehen or thick description is really a method that we had to use to understand the behaviours and intentions of our motorcycling veterans. Merely objective observation, if observation can be objective, would be thin description. Thus, observing that some bikers wear the ‘1%’ sign, a diamond shaped green-on-white embroidered ‘1%’ is relevant as it describes what people are wearing, but it does not tell us why they are wearing it and what meaning they bestow on it. One of our key questions on the honour code was designed to find out where the veterans stand on the issue of societal integration or alienation. A simple open-ended question like ‘what do you think of/feel about the “1%” symbol’ triggered a world of significant responses that explained the respondent’s place in the social network, his world view, his position towards other groupings and the meaning that he bestowed on this seemingly trivial piece of garment that is only two or three square centimetres but the key to the webs of significance.

The origin of the ‘1%’ patch was disturbance in the town of Hollister (Hayes 2005). A motor race that attracted some 4000 attendants derailed and perhaps 500 people got into a fight. The police nabbed a few of the bikers. About 50 persons needed medical attention. A staged photo of an obviously drunk biker was published in *Life Magazine* and titled ‘Cyclist’s Holiday: He and Friends Terrorize Town’. According to an urban myth the *American Motorcycle Association* tried to save the day and stated that 99 per cent of bikers are decent and only 1 per cent caused troubles. Nowadays the ‘1%’ patch refers back to this incident, but the meaning given to this patch differs from group to group, from individual to individual.

Some clearly equate the patch with Business Clubs like the Bandidos and the Hells Angels, indicating that this is something to be proud of: ‘the one per cent that don’t fit and don’t care’ (Thompson 1967: 4). Hunter S. Thompson, famed for his book *Hell’s Angels* (1967), obviously equates the ‘1%’ patch with anti-social behaviours. The respondents we interviewed sometimes did not realize the outlaw connotation of the symbol. Policeman Pete said: ‘I have worn the 1% patch on my vest for a while and thought it looked cool, but back then I did not really know what it meant. When I later got into religion, I immediately have removed the patch’. Policeman Pete felt he had made a mistake stemming from naivety and could not wear the patch for reasons of profession and morality.

But to other bikers, like Jack, member of the Veterans MC, the patch only expresses solidarity with the tradition and history of motorcyclists and to him it signifies the band of brotherhood between bikers. In his worldview the patch is not associated with crime or Outlaw Motorcycle Groups. Here we see a different meaning given to this key symbol in motorcycling.

What does 1% mean to me? . . . To me, riding my bike is the ultimate feeling of freedom . . . Maybe 1% means the most that you always are and want to be this way. 1% does not stop after Sunday-night. Also my experiences as a soldier in Lebanon had its influence. A half year with my buddies, together one job, all in green; other colors

didn't matter. I watch your back, you watch mine. Even under difficult circumstances you take care of each other. That creates a bond, a brotherhood. Back home it is not easy to re-adapt . . . To the 1%-er, his motorcycle is his life. 1% is not a patch; it's not a Club; it's WHO YOU ARE!

Thick description and kinetic ethnography are thus methodologically joined in order to uncover layers of hidden meaning.

The ethics of involvement and detachment: Informed consent

When entry to the field is obtained and trust is established, the question is under which conditions do groups under study agree to this entry? The follow-up question is how to sustain trust. This is a problem of a general nature that many ethnographers experience.

In his book *Anthropologists at Arms* George Lucas (2009) tries to find a solution to the problem that military Human Terrain Teams experience when they go out information gathering. It is the problem that is inherent to groups that are vulnerable in one way or the other and thus it also applies to the study of motorcycling veterans. If the researcher is involved, and to a degree he or she must be, the group under study will feel it to be an act of betrayal when the results of the study give away information that is harmful to the group.

The reason why the American Anthropological Association is opposed to anthropologists working in Human Terrain Teams is that the information is used for tactical military decisions and political ends of (mostly) Western powers (The Network of Concerned Anthropologists, 2009). There is no problem with critical analysis and solid conclusions, but when the results end up in exploitation of the group, moral frictions arise, trust is violated and the psychological contract broken.

George Lucas (2009) states that informed consent is a way out of this problem. If group members know the observations form part of a study, if the aim of the study is clear, and if the researchers use member checks to verify the quality of interviews the problem of possible harm to groups and feeling that psychological contracts have been broken can be dealt with. The ethical code of the American Anthropological Association states that researchers should obtain:

in advance the informed consent of persons being studied . . . it is understood that the degree and breadth of informed consent required will depend on the nature of the project . . . Further, it is understood that the informed consent process is dynamic and continuous; the process should be initiated in the project design and continue through implementation by way of dialogue and negotiation with those studied . . . Informed consent does not require . . . a written or signed form. It is the quality of the consent, not the format, that is relevant.

(AAA Code of ethics, quoted in Lucas 2009: 206)

Lucas points at the complexities of informed consent and the study into veterans ran into similar difficulties. Even though the researchers tried to guarantee anonymity to those who wanted their identity protected, the study did affect individuals in their private and professional lives and the researchers not always succeeded in protecting their respondents.

By use of member checks respondents could put forward changes that could enhance their own protection. In the case of the religiously motivated Policeman Pete we used a different name to guarantee anonymity but as a member of a quite particular identifiable group, the

Christian Motorcycle Association, bikers from other groups fitted missing pieces together and discovered his true identity, which raised suspicion against him. But Pete did not stop visiting these rallies trying to bring words of salvation. As a result the Police Force questioned his integrity, probably arguing that he could be liable to corruption, or leak information, if he kept on visiting the scene. Policeman Pete in the end was transferred to a different department not connected to criminal investigations inside the world of the motorcycle Business Clubs.

Bikers could be harmed in many more ways. The Dutch Ministry of Defence does not want its employees to be associated with MCs because of possible infringements to integrity. On the other hand, members of MCs feel incriminated by what they feel are false accusations, allegations, labelling and stereotyping. The study into motorcycling veterans therefore could easily hurt the respondents, especially those who are on active duty. Many fear for their job or chances of promotion. Besides the use of member checks as one method of informed consent and inviting them to the book launch where the results were presented created involvement. Informed consent helped opening up communication with veterans.

Concluding

The balance between involvement and detachment is skewed to the involvement side by the methods that make part of kinetic ethnography. It is necessary to gain entry and to win trust, but there is more to the methodology that causes the skewed balance. The fact that bodies and especially the motorcycle of the researchers are research tools implies that they are physically involved in the situation. Campfire interviews, field notes, thick description and informed consent are methodologies that ethnographers will use to get close to their subjects. This does mean that the researchers run the risk of losing detached observation, and they will have to safeguard themselves from going native. If they succeed in safeguarding themselves from going native they can really understand their subjects well (*Verstehen*). If they fail, they will be lost in involvement.

Notes

- 1 A transitional ceremony in church would be liminal, whereas going to a rock concert would be liminoid. The difference between the two concepts relates to the religious or non-religious character of the event.
- 2 International Business Clubs, also known as Outlaw Motorcycle Groups (OMG) are Pagans, Hells Angels, Outlaws MC, and Bandidos. These are 'the big four'.
- 3 The quotes are taken from an interview that is available on YouTube (see list of references).
- 4 The levels of sociocultural analyses are the indexical, the homological and the integral (diachronic) (Willis 1978: 189–203).

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