SAGE researchmethods cases

Ethnography: Separating Your Different Selves in a Covert Field Study of So-Called "Status Dog" Owners

Abstract

By virtue of being the owner of a registered Pit Bull, I had a unique access to an otherwise hard-to-reach group of so called "status" dog owners in South East London. A field journal of mostly covert observations of and participations in a group of "status" dog owners was kept. A more overt approach was not to be taken as the research constituted an area central to my own private life. The experience of being at the center of my own research of these dog owners meant that I was both an insider and outsider at the same time and I had to find a way to separate my private self from my research self and this was done using a reflexive approach. The approach generated rich data, but it was also vulnerable on a practical and personal level as there were no escape route and it was emotionally challenging.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Identify practical and emotional challenges of ethnographic field research
- Understand distinctions between being an insider and/or outsider
- Evaluate the pros and cons of being at the centre of your own research
- Recognize the importance of reflexivity
- Discuss ethical considerations of covert research

Project Overview and Context

In June 2008, I was granted an exemption order for my American Pitbull Terrier (hereafter pit bull). In the United Kingdom, the ownership, breeding, and selling of pit bulls (and three other breeds) is prohibited according to the Dangerous Dogs Act (hereafter DDA) unless you have been granted an exemption order according to which the dog must be neutered, leashed, and muzzled in public and be covered by third-party liability insurance (Kaspersson, 2008). This project began with a field journal kept as an experiment after my being granted the order. Because of the muzzled dog, people spoke to me who might not otherwise have done so. The dog functioned as a conversational ice-breaker and initiated conversations and interactions with both dog owners and others in the same way that June McNicholas and Collis (2000) demonstrate. In turn, the dog provided a natural access to a population of young, working-class men with so called "status" dogs who can otherwise be hard to reach (Sydor, 2013). So called "status" dog owners (see Maher & Pierpoint, 2011 for a discussion of the terminology) are usually wary about admitting their dog is a pit bull, because of the DDA, but they have no problems admitting it when I have my dog with me or show photos on my mobile phone. After a few months of my keeping the journal, the generated data were found to be detailed and rich

enough for analysis, and I continued to keep it. I entered the field with some notions as to what kind of behaviors I would observe, based on previous dog owner encounters and research, and with a suspicion the writing in media—focussing on organized dog fighting, dogs used as weapons and the connection between "status" dog ownership and gang membership—was not completely accurate. Since other research has specifically targeted problematic or negative "status" dog ownership (Hughes et al., 2011, Maher & Pierpoint, 2011; Harding 2012). I wanted to utilize my access to less or non-problematic "status" dog ownership to be able to provide a more complete picture. The end point of the project was when I moved to a different area in July 2010.

Research Practicalities

On a practical level, there were mainly two issues I needed to consider. First, the use of a convenience sample of a hard-to-reach group and second, the practicalities of walking my dog and gathering data at the same time and the ensuing ethical issues when a covert approach was adopted. These issues will be discussed in the following sections.

Using a Convenience Sample

So called hard-to-reach groups are difficult for researchers to reach because of their lifestyle (e.g., criminals or drug users) or because the focus of the research regards sensitive issues (such as victimization or mental health). Anna Sydor (2013) points out that they might not be willing to participate because of the research topic or are not accessed by more conventional means because of their lifestyle. Access to such groups and how to ensure their participation in research must therefore be considered. So called "status" dog owners can be considered a hard-to-reach group as they are not always part of public dog-owning activities such as walking or taking the dog to the veterinary practice. Due to the breed ban under the DDA some owners will not admit their dog is a banned breed, they do not walk their dogs, or if they do they walk them late at night (Hughes et al., 2011). I consequently wanted to utilize the natural and relatively easy access I had to this group thanks to the dog.

This sample was a convenience sample selected due to its being available and accessible to me. I had access to an otherwise hard-to-reach group and, in Alan Bryman's words (2016:187), it represented "too good an opportunity to be missed." Using such a sample, however, is not without problems. One problem concerns whether the sample represents the whole group. Even though I had access to a group of "status" dog owners, I did not have access to all of them, such as those not exercising their dogs. Anna Sydor (2013) points out that the gathered information might be biased and not representative of the whole group, but also that this

information is still better than no information at all. With regard to this project, those walking their "status" dog in public places and not at night can be considered to be the non-problematic or less problematic owners that have not been previously studied and were precisely those I wanted to target.

Another problem is that it is not possible to tell how large the group actually is (Sydor 2013). It is therefore not possible to estimate how much of "status" dog ownership is problematic or not. This is an issue regarding "status" dogs in general and banned breeds in particular because it is not even known how many pit bulls there are in the United Kingdom, only that about 1,000 of them currently are on the Exempted Dogs Register (Kaspersson 2008).

Covert Approach and Ethical Considerations

I needed to consider how to combine the research with my day-to-day dog-owning life. It was not practically possible to combine the dog walking with recording and more structured conversations; I needed both hands to handle the dog. The nature of the research therefore limited how systematic I could be in my research and still maintain a normal private life. After considering the ethical issues, a covert approach was adopted whereby I did not seek informed consent from the participants. After the experimental stage of the field journal and before I continued with the more focussed keeping of it, I discussed these issues with the School Ethics Officer and we agreed that because the study consisted of keeping a journal and no questionnaires or formal interviews were used or personal data generated, ethical approval of the research design, data compiling, and data storage was not needed. The observations were part of my natural dog owner's life and the interactions would have taken place whether I was keeping a journal or not. Even if ethical approval did not need to be sought, ethical issues still needed to be considered and are discussed below.

The first ethical issue considered was consequently the covert nature of the study, as informed consent was not sought from the participants. Both Bruce Berg (2009) and Emma Wincup (2017) discuss how a covert research approach may be justified in sensitive areas, where the field would otherwise be closed to research. Covert research can also be justified as an approach where overt methods would distort the field and therefore not provide accurate results. Simon Harding (2012), for example, approached dog owners in parks and other places where dogs are commonly walked, but 75% of those asked declined to take part. Unlike Harding, I had access to "status" dog owners, but I felt it necessary to keep my research unknown so as not to antagonize the people I talked to and perhaps influence how freely they talked to me (compare Matthew Lauder's, (2003) discussion of covert research on a neo-Nazi organization). Many people connect being a criminologist with the police and may think I will

inform on them, even though my owning a banned dog perhaps would have countered this perception.

Another ethical consideration, which Emma Wincup (2017) discusses, regards not causing any harm to your research subjects as a result of your covert actions, and no harm to the participants was imagined as a result of this study. It focussed on an under-researched group, and previously unknown issues regarding dog ownership might be revealed as a result. Deception can therefore be justified on grounds of utility because, as Anne Mulhall (2003) puts it, it might benefit the dog owners later.

That no harm is caused is also connected to guaranteeing the participants' anonymity. Sometimes I did learn about or observe criminal behavior, an experience shared with Geoffrey Pearson (2009) in his study of football hooligans, usually in form of ownership or breeding of a banned breed dog, but also underage drinking and drug taking. Only knowing the first name of a few dog owners and not knowing their addresses, only in which area or on which estate they lived, guaranteed the participants' anonymity; they cannot be identified from my material. Still, to be on the safe side, the names of the dogs, owners, and places were changed. I took to heart what Matthew Lauder (2003) said regarding participant observation that "a covert approach that guarantees anonymity balances the fundamental right to privacy while allowing access to insider information" (p. 194).

My covert research role was also justified on a personal safety level, which Pearson (2009) discusses regarding football hooligans. I walk my dog as part of my everyday life, and the activities involved in the research project were therefore not limited in time and space. I was always in the field, which meant I could not have "dropped out" and disappeared if I would have been found out. I might not have risked physical violence if found out, as Matthew Lauder (2003) and Geoffrey Pearson (2009) did, but antagonism and harassment of different kinds would still have made my life more difficult. Even though my role was covert, I did not hide my profession as a university lecturer if anyone asked—and those were very few and usually not "status" dog owners. Occasionally, when an explanation of my interest was needed, I simply told that I was "doing work on the DDA" which was considered a satisfactory answer.

Research Design

There are many definitions of what ethnography entails, and Emma Wincup (2017: 116) identifies common denominators as "the study of groups of people in their natural setting," that the study involves the researcher being present for extended periods of time and that the data are "collected systematically about their daily activities and the meanings they attach to them."

Ethnographic research involves the immersion in a social setting to enable observation, participation, and understanding of a certain group. This project achieved this immersion by participant observation undertaken during dog walks.

Alan Bryman (2016) discusses different forms of ethnography, differentiating between overt and covert roles and open and closed settings. In this research, I played a covert role as it was known I am the owner of an exempted pit bull, but not that I was observing other dog owners. The setting was open, consisting of public parks and roads. The research consisted of observations during which a passive role was played and participant observations where I was playing an active role interacting with my dog and with other dogs and their owners, as well as having resultant natural conversations. The study was natural and unobtrusive as it involved a natural part of my life as a dog owner and situations were not manipulated or staged. Conversations were carried out as a natural part of dog owner socialization and almost exclusively centered on dogs. There was a core of people and dogs I encountered or observed more often than others, some of which I became quite friendly with, and others I only met once or twice.

In the experimental stage of keeping the Dog Log, the study was unstructured and the observations were not fully systematic. Anne Mulhall (2003) points out how unstructured observations often are used when the researcher enters the field without predetermined notions as to what kind of behaviors will be observed, even though in this case I had some ideas based on research and media reports. Bruce Berg (2009) discusses how access to the field is facilitated by knowledge about the people and familiarity with their routines and rituals. With time, I got to know the places and owners better and I could be more systematic and structured in my approach on the basis of themes emerging in the data. The places, times, and owners that generated the most information were targeted. For example, two specific parks were targeted as they were surrounded by working-class estates where many of the "status" dog owners lived. Four o'clock was targeted at weekdays for meeting teenage "status" dog owners taking their dogs out after school and late weekend mornings for adult "status" dog owners.

My access to the field, and young "status" dog owners in particular, was also facilitated by one male Black teenage owner of a Staffordshire Bull Terrier, who admired my dog very much. He acted as a guide since he was what Bruce Berg (2009) calls an "indigenous" person found among the group and in the setting I studied. He introduced me to several other "status" dogs and their owners that he commonly interacted with.

The Field Journal—The Dog Log

Anne Mulhall (2003) discusses the central part that researchers' field notes play in observational studies. The field is constructed through both our actions and data collection and through writing our field notes. Field notes are often messy, loose texts and they make no claim to be final or fixed versions of events. The main data source in the project was the field journal, which I called the Dog Log. In it events experienced when walking the dog and observations regarding "status" dogs and their owners were recorded with a separate section for personal reflections. Because it is difficult to anticipate what might be of importance or relevance, especially when I had just started keeping the Dog Log, I wrote down incidents relating to dogs and dog ownership in general, as well as events that were affecting me on a more personal level, following the general guidelines of "writing down everything" as advocated by, among others, Alan Bryman (2016). The field journal consisted of two main types of notes, as discussed by Anne Mulhall (2003). First, notes consisting of descriptions of the environments, people, dogs, and actions where I was an observer and did not participate. An example,

> Heard what sounded like a dog fight between big dogs at a distance. The sound came from the meadow direction. A little later I heard smaller dog/s bark and it didn't sound nice. Hazel was curious and excited by the sound and most willing to come with me. Then I heard something that sounded either like someone rapping a door or whipping (a dog?). No one was on the meadow, but in the yard in the estate were at least four young men with dogs—Staffies, maybe pit bulls, something else. One of these was very aggressive, but all that the young men did was holding them back. Luckily, all were on lead. I couldn't see any injured dogs or persons, so took Hazel to the other side of the meadow, hoping none of the dogs would escape. (*The Dog Log* 8 October 2009)

The second type of notes Mulhall (2003) discusses are in the form of dialogue and consist of written representations of what was said. These are mostly events in which I participated, rather than just observed. I either relayed what had been said or included direct quotes when I remembered them verbatim. An example,

> The police had come to his place (I think he said) and Hoover's dad explained it wasn't the dog's fault [that it had bitten another dog], and he's not human aggressive. He was now worried the police would come and take the dog away. "I'd rather kill him [the dog]—or them—than let them take him." I explained that it would actually be the best if he just complied if the police would come. "But they will kill him. They take him away and kill him." I told him they wouldn't—as I have been through it myself. He said people say you never get the dog back, but I'm living proof you do. (*The Dog Log* 19 September 2009)

In addition to the field notes, I kept a list of the dogs I met, recording the dog's name, gender, and breed (as identified by the owners) and information about the owners (gender, age, ethnicity, and social class, if these were possible to establish).

Your memory is very important in field work as very often you cannot record things as and when they happen, but have to wait to a later occasion to write down incidents, conversations, and thoughts (Bryman, 2016). For me, it was not possible to use a recording device or note taking in the field as both hands were needed for handling the dog. My approach consisted of writing my notes when I was back home and relied on my memory and recall of events to be accurate, as Anne Mulhall (2003) discusses. Emma Wincup (2017) points out how you need to develop strategies of memory recall and I relied on mental notes. These mental notes were made while walking back home with the dog—even though at times that was when things happened—and my full field notes were written down when I returned home. I would tell the event out loud to myself, often repeatedly if the walk was long, and therefore some of the entries are neat and tidy while others are more messy and sometimes less coherent. As the walks usually lasted about an hour, or up to 2 hr on weekends, there was not too much to memorize before things could be written down, so mental notes worked well for me. The mental note taking also allowed for a layer of reflection (more below) before the entry into the Dog Log and it meant that some emotional reactions—mostly anger—were already dealt with when the notes were taken and the reflective parts were consequently very brief. Sahar Suleiman Al-Makhamreh and Lewando-Hunt (2008) point out that it can sometimes be an advantage not to write down incidents immediately when you are still frustrated, but later so that the feelings did not affect the accuracy. An example of a very brief reflection and a slightly longer one follow:

> I was walking some bit behind the dog and its owner. As they met the mother and boy the dog barked quite aggressively at them. The owner struggled a bit with the dog. Afterwards she punished the dog by smacking it with the lead. (---) *Reflection*: Incompetent dog owner! (*The Dog Log* 4 November 2009)

> *Reflection*: Prime's dad doesn't know about DDA, which is remarkable as Prime is a pit bull. He didn't seem even to have heard about it. I have never been met with aggression before when I tell Hazel is spayed. People have found it a pity, but never before hostility. I was glad Sphinx's mum was there. (*The Dog Log* 7 May 2009)

Method in Action

This project provides examples of how issues surrounding observations and interactions can affect the data generation, how you as the researcher need to separate your different selves

and deal with emotional issues, and how a reflexive approach can be useful in achieving this.

Insider/Outsider

Denise Tse Shang Tang (2007) discusses the distinction commonly made between insider and outsider positions as a researcher. An outsider is someone who is not a part of the researched group and the position can make for a more objective approach. An insider is a researcher with shared experiences with the researched community, and it can provide greater insights. It is also possible to be both, what describes as being an "outsider within" or what Orla McGarry (2016) terms a "welcome outsider," which is the experience I had.

I was an outsider in two different aspects: in the general dog-owning population because of owning a pit bull and in the "status" dog–owning population because of being a middle-class, middle-aged woman and also because the dog is muzzled and registered under the DDA. The positionality as an outsider caused no reactivity effects. Alan Bryman (2016) defines reactivity as the response of research participants to the fact that they know they are being studied, and it can result in untypical behavior. The simple observations carried out in my outsider positionality were unobtrusive, and I played a passive role in the research situation. Both positive and negative aspects of dog ownership and dog–human interactions were observed or participated in, and these were not influenced by me or my dog.

However, when I was an insider there were reactivity effects. In general, Sahar Suleiman Al-Makhamreh and Lewando-Hunt (2008) discuss how an insider role can help the interaction with informants, who assume a shared understanding of the cultural context. In a similar vein, Orla McGarry (2016) points out how commonalities can enhance the type of engagement you as researcher have with your participants. My positionality as an insider affected the outcome, both because I was a more subjective participant and because of reactivity effects. The dog owners did not know they were being studied and I was not known as a researcher, but they knew I was an owner of an exempted dog. Caroline Knowles (2006) discusses how you need to be open about the emotional baggage you bring to the field, and I was aware my view of the DDA was neither neutral nor favorable due to my experience of it. My dog and my experience prompted a lot of discussion regarding the DDA, breed bans, and the police, and only negative experiences were discussed. The owners assumed anyone with any experience of the police must have a negative view of them and in order not to affect how freely they spoke to me I let them believe I shared their views and only challenged factually incorrect statements, not opinions, and views. Drawing on Jeremy Northcote (2004) I was using a "bracketing" approach where I avoided making judgments about the participants' claims, but tried to represent their views and opinions instead.

Reflexivity: Separating Your Research and Private Selves

All through the project I was central to the access to the field and to data generation. Emma Wincup (2017) points out that it is important to reflect upon the implications of this. For this project, it meant that during the research period I had to find ways to separate my research and private selves to enable a normal private life. Later, while analysis and writing up was taking place, I needed to sift myself out of the data and the analysis. Amanda Coffey (1999) discusses these kinds of issues in her work on the ethnographic self, and Linda Finlay (2002) discusses self-dialogue and a reflexive approach where the researcher is critically examining his or her effect as a researcher on the research process. Linda Finlay (2002, p. 210) explains reflexivity as "examining how the researcher and intersubjective elements impinge on, and even transform, research."

Amanda Coffey (1999) points out how a researcher who both lives and works in the field needs time out and space to discern the different relations that develop, private and research related, and how they are affecting and influencing one another. While the data generation was going on, I used the short reflexive accounts in the field journal to digest personal reactions, thoughts, and emotions, so they could be sifted out from the research project. Drawing on the work of Linda Finlay (2002), I tried to critically examine my effect as a researcher on the research process. The reflective accounts helped me to deal with issues concerning my private self because some reactions were personally emotional and unrelated to the research. They were used to let off steam, verbalize my anger or frustration—such as calling people stupid or irresponsible—and to express my own opinions, which were suppressed while in the field. I also discussed these issues of anger and emotion with my partner, who shared some of the experiences.

The second set of separation of my private and research selves regards the analysis of data and the writing up of results. As the project followed the trajectory outlined by Anne Mulhall (2003) it moved from the subjective account in the field notes, writing in first person and from my perspective, to the third person and an objective perspective in the analysis and writing up. This shift was made possible as the personal self was sifted out in the analysis and the more objective ethnographic self took over as themes were identified and applied to theories (Coffey 1999).

Data Analysis

The Dog Log was analyzed in two stages. The first analytical stage happened in tandem with the research between June 2008 and July 2010. Ideas and themes emerged and were explored

further as the observations were made and field notes were written and read. After the research period ended in July 2010, the log was left for over a year before I reread it and started the second stage of analysis in autumn 2011. This period of time, and the move to a very different area, allowed for reflections not only on the events in the log but also on what had been present in my surroundings that did not become conscious to me until I was outside of them. Emma Wincup (2017) points out that it is not uncommon that projects of this kind take a lot of time.

The field notes were analyzed utilizing a thematic analytic approach which identified themes illustrated by the data. Gery Ryan and Russell Bernard (2003) define a theme as a category relating to the research focus which provides the basis for a theoretical understanding of the data. Thematic analysis is based on your thorough reading and rereading of your notes. When Alan Bryman (2016) discusses thematic analysis in qualitative research he points out it is important that the researcher makes it clear how themes were identified and justify why they are important and significant.

Gery Ryan and Russell Bernard (2003) discuss techniques to identify themes and how they can come both from the data and from the researcher's prior understanding. In my case, the analysis initially built on themes already identified in research while new themes were identified from the analysis of the field journal. The first stage of data analysis addressed themes identified in previous research, such as animal abuse and gang membership (Maher & Pierpoint 2011), negative ownership (Hughes et al. 2011), dogs used as weapons (Harding 2012), and from personal experiences. New themes were then identified as they appeared in the text, such as backyard breeding, love and affection felt for the dogs, financial issues surrounding dog ownership, and the limited knowledge of the DDA. In the second stage, with the benefit of a period of reflection in between, central themes and subthemes were derived from a thorough reading and rereading of the field notes (Ryan & Bernard 2003). Patterns emerged and were explored, tested, further developed, or discarded, and it led to progressive focussing, which Emma Wincup (2017) defines as moving from a "thick description" of the dog owners to developing and testing explanations and theories as the work proceeded. This generated a deeper understanding of the dog owners in the research area.

For example, I discovered that after my dog had to begin wearing a muzzle it provoked new kinds of reactions from people, and this was identified as a theme. The reactions differed between people, and subthemes emerged when classifying them, for example, non-dog people (assuming the muzzle means the dog is human aggressive), dog people (assuming the muzzle means the dog is dog aggressive), pit bull people (taking the muzzle as a sign the dog is "vicious" and this is considered a positive trait), and pit bull–specific hostility (the muzzle

signifies an aggressive pit bull that should not be allowed to be alive, or at least not walked in public).

Practical Lessons Learned

This case demonstrated that researching a group where you are at the centre is an approach that worked regarding a hard-to-reach and under-researched population, but it also had its weaknesses. The practical lessons learned were as follows:

- *Lesson on a personal level.* When being at the centre of your own research you are affected on a personal and emotional level and that can make the research process challenging and can affect the data collection and analysis. How to deal with these issues needs to be considered in the research design.
- *The importance of reflexivity.* A strategy to deal with personal impact and to separate your research self from your private self needs to be established. A reflective approach can provide this.
- *Lesson I on a practical level.* If things go wrong, for whatever reason, there is no possibility to drop out or leave the field, temporarily or permanently. In my case, the whole project fell apart when I had to exit the field.
- *Lesson II on a practical level.* The data could have been used as a building block for future research, which could have included more focussed data collection (such as interviews and focus groups of identified relevant participants) utilizing the research access and established relationships, in combination with the themes found in the analysis of the data. When I had to leave the area, however, the access was lost.

Conclusions

Utilizing an approach where you are at the centre of your own research can be justified when it grants access to a hard-to-reach population that might be otherwise difficult to study. When being at the centre of your own research, a separation of your different selves needs to be made, and this case has considered how reflexivity can help separate the research self from the private self. This separation is not always easy, however, and the researcher has to be prepared to encounter challenges that can be deeply personal and emotional. My access to "status" dog owners meant that this was an opportunity to gain information on a stigmatized, powerless, and under-researched group that I as a dog lover and Pit Bull owner felt obliged to take. It also demonstrated the vulnerability of the approach. On the practical level, it meant that the research had to be abandoned when events outside of the research required that I move away from the area and I lost access. On the personal level, it also meant that I was more

vulnerable, since I was researching a central part of my life and I had nowhere to escape to when things got tough. The reflexive exercise was personally beneficial for me as the researcher when I encountered these challenges.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. What are the benefits of being at the centre of your own research? And what are the dangers or pitfalls?
2. How can positionalities of being an insider or outsider or a combination of both affect data generation?
3. What is meant by a reflexive approach? How can it be achieved within a project?
4. Outline the advantages and disadvantages of covert research.

Further Reading

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