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An Exploration of the Basis and Implications of My Insider Ethnographic Status


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DOI link to article:
https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526449405

Date deposited:
29/03/2018
Case Title

An exploration of the basis and implications of my insider-ethnographic status.

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Discipline: D3 [please do not alter]

Sub-discipline

Sociology of Sport and Leisure [SD-Soc-17]

Academic Level

Advanced Undergraduate

Contributor Biographies

Andreas Giazitzoglu is a lecturer at Newcastle University. He completed a PhD between 2007-2010. Andreas’ PhD is an ethnography which investigates how masculinity is ‘lived’ in a post-industrial British town. A public gymnasium was used as the primary research site for his ethnography.
Published Articles (from PhD)


Giazitzoglu, A. 2014. ‘Qualitative Upward Mobility, the Mass-Media and 'Posh' Masculinity in Contemporary North-East Britain: A Micro Sociological Case-Study’. *Sociological Research Online* 19 (2), 12

Abstract

I discuss my experiences of ethnographically researching masculinity in a public gymnasium (Gym D). I demonstrate how - through my class-based, gendered, ethnic and embodied identity – I was able to adopt an ‘insider’ ethnographic position when researching male users of Gym D. I consider the implications of the insider position I took on from an analytic and ethical point of view. My experiences of researching Gym D amount to a case-study for others to consider when reflecting on how their own identity as an ethnographer may impact their relationships with participants ‘in the field’ and, concurrently, the sort of data they access and the ethicality of the relationships they forge during the ethnographic process.

Learning Outcomes

“By the end of this case students should be able to”

- Have an understanding of how different fields create different challenges for ethnographic researchers.
- Consider the morality of entering a research field, then leaving that research field.
- Outline how features of a researchers’ identity impacts that researchers’ time in the field and ability to elicit data.
Case Study

Project Overview

Ethnographers systematically observe people involved in a cultural phenomenon, in order to make sense of that cultural phenomenon and produce a written account of the observed group. (E.g. when Armstrong, 1993, observed men fighting with each other when researching the cultural phenomenon of football hooliganism). When ethnographers systematically observe people, they are involved in the participant observation process. Participant observations may be covert (one’s participants do not know they are being observed and researched) or overt (one’s participants know they are being observed and researched). While participant observation is the predominant aspect of ethnography, often ethnographers supplement their participant observations by interviewing those they research. Data inducted in interviews allows ethnographers to, potentially, produce a more substantive written account that relies on participants’ voices, as well as the ethnographer’s observations.

The extent to which an ethnographer should ‘be like’ the participants they research, and ‘join in’ with the cultural phenomenon being investigated is contested. Some claim ethnographers who are very involved with their participants and the investigated cultural phenomenon– i.e. ethnographic insiders – are too close to their participants to objectively observe and analyze them. Others claim ethnographers unfamiliar with their participants – outsiders - will lack true access to their participants, and key cultural behaviors may remain hidden from their observations. (See Bryman, 2012: 420 - 500 for more on ethnography as a research method. See Merton, 1972, for a discussion on the distinctions between insider/outsider ethnography).
Gymnasiums have emerged as research sites that intrigue ethnographers, with gym-users being observed by several ethnographers. Yet, extant ethnographic studies into gyms fail to properly consider the relationship between those *researching* and those *being researched* in gyms, and how notions of being an insider or outsider impact upon ethnography in gyms. This is problematic. The extent to which gym-using participants articulate their views, behave authentically in front of, and grant access to ethnographers depends, to a large extent, on how familiar the ethnographer seems to be with ‘gym culture’. If an ethnographer lacks the right embodiment and sufficient skill when completing exercises in a gym in the presence of participants they will, almost certainly, not be seen as a legitimate ‘insider’ by participants. This lack of insider-status may prevent access and fully nuanced data being realized by the ethnographer during the research process. However, polemics relating to insider/outside ethnography (Merton, 1972) have not been explored in relation to gym ethnography. Questions about how best to ethnographically access and study gyms, and those who use them, remain unasked. Further, the extent to which current data induced in gyms by ethnographers can be seen as being produced by legitimate ethnographic insiders has not been discussed.

**Literature**

Klein’s (1993) seminal ethnography into southern California’s bodybuilding community says almost nothing about how Klein’s identity, embodiment and experiences of bodybuilding impacted upon his relationships in the field, and therefore the sort of data Klein’s participants afforded him, when he observed and interviewed them. In interviews, did Klein’s participants merely tell Klein what they thought he wanted to hear as an academic of a different age and class to them? Klein claims to have been a ‘quasi-insider (:283). However, this assertion is contentious: what is the basis for this alleged
quasi-insider position? Klein’s study is rightly celebrated, but is polemically weakened by Klein’s reluctance to reflect on how his field experience, elicited data and observations may have been impacted by his participants views of him as an insider or outsider.

Andrews et al’s (2005) ethnography of ‘hardcore bodybuilders’ saw a researcher train, on a weekly basis, with participants in a gym, and indulge in related behavior like the consumption of protein shakes. Hence, Andrews et al’s study is founded upon a level of insider status: the research participated in the cultural phenomenon studied. Yet this insider status, and its impact on data acquisition, is not elaborated upon. The extent to which a weekly training session can enable the sort of rapport and dialogue needed for rich, qualitative data to emerge from ‘hardcore bodybuilders’ about their practices is not debated by Andrews et al. Likewise, Monaghan (2001) – in my view the most convincing ethnographer of bodybuilding – fails to consider how his own physiology, employed training methods and views on/use of steroids impacted the access and rapport he established with Welsh bodybuilding participants. The quality of Monaghan’s data suggests a deep relationship existed between Monaghan and those he observed. Yet, questions about how this deep relationship came about between Monaghan and his participants – and how this relationship was both an advantage and disadvantage from a methodological perspective- are unexplored.

Bridges’ (2009: 85) states, in his ethnography of four ‘hardcore’ US gyms, that:

‘As a reflexive ethnographer, I trust that my being a young man intrigued by weight-lifting culture aided me in gaining access to this group. While much smaller in stature, my own social history of athletics lent me enough status among the men at least to enable my observations to be less disruptive to their daily routines. Additionally, lifting alongside them allowed me to gain trust and to establish a relationship with them on their own’.
Above, Bridges hints at the fundamental relationship between gyms as research sites, gym-users as participants and the identities, especially embodied identity, of gym-ethnographers. Yet Bridges only addresses this notion over three sentences, and in a provisional way. Clearly, there is scope for this key relationship to be explored more rigorously. The implications of insider/outsider status for ethnographers researching gyms should not have been omitted to this degree.

Research project

In response, this case-study explores the implications of my identity and insider status upon an ethnographic study I conducted in a public gymnasium (Gym D). Gym D is located in a post-industrial town (Dramen) in the north-east of England (UK). My ethnography aimed to understand how men in Dramen have coped, or failed to cope, with the closure of Dramen’s coalmines, which happened in the 1980s. Specifically, I aimed to understand how Gym D and bodybuilding has aided men in Dramen adapt to the loss of ‘their’ coalmining culture. Ethnography was a salient research method to adopt. Ethnography allowed me to observe and experience how masculinity is projected and negotiated in Dramen and Gym D first-hand, by different sorts of men who inhabit these spaces and participate in the phenomenon of bodybuilding.

My fieldwork took place between January 2007 and January 2009, when I researched a pool of white, mainly working class males who ritually use Gym D. My ethnography generated data through three processes:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Nature</th>
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<tr>
<td>1) Participant observational research</td>
<td>Training in Gym D, with Gym D’s users, on average five times per week. Also, observing Gym D’s users in a particular part of the gym, where they congregate to chat, consume bodybuilding supplements and queue for sunbeds. Research-notes were made in a notebook to capture meaningful qualitative data that arose through observations. Observational data was then ordered into themes, using a computer package.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Semi-structured qualitative interviews</td>
<td>Interviews generated conversational data that was recorded and transcribed. Conversations were guided by open-ended leading questions and took place with 42 users of Gym D, who became consenting research participants.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3) ‘Hanging out’ with and observing participants in the various public spaces they frequent in their leisure lives, such as nightclubs, shopping centers and tanning salons.</td>
<td>Meaningful data from these observations was recorded in a notebook, but the ‘hanging out’ process was used primarily to improve rapport with participants.</td>
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Gym D is where Dramen’s bodybuilders, bouncers and local ‘hard men’ build their anatomies.

Illegal anabolic steroids are freely available and taken in Gym D. Gym D hosts specific training apparatus and weights of a certain weight, so that the demands of Dramen’s serious gym users can be met in the space. Most of the men I encountered in Gym D exemplify a style of masculinity defined by ‘laddhsiness’ and a reputation for excessive dedication to weight-lifting, high protein diets and, in many cases, anabolic-steroid-use. Outsiders are treated inhospitably in Gym D; especially after ‘undercover policeman’ reputedly infiltrated the gym to ‘gain intelligence’ on some members of Dramen’s underworld. Hence, Gym D is a closed space, housing enigmatic, elusive local men involved in serious bodybuilding. To ethnographically access and understand Gym D’s community, an insider status is needed.
Action

Having established the need to be an insider within Gym D, I now explore how I researched Gym D as an insider ethnographer. I demonstrate how my identity in the forms of social-class, race, gender and – particularly – embodiment were all conducive to me adopting a necessary level of insider status when researching Gym D.

Social-Class

I was born in Dramen, and grew up a few miles outside of Dramen. Although I moved away from the Dramen area for the purpose of university – and happily stayed away upon finding employment in the south of England – I was able, upon re-entering Gym D as an ethnographer, to appear similar to those I researched at the level of social-class identity. Social-class identity is denoted in various ways, including through one’s accent, sense of humor, choice of clothing and conversational topics. My upbringing meant I knew how to ‘perform’ in a working-class context. Upon re-entering Gym D, I was seen as ‘working class enough’ by the gym’s community. Through an exaggerated regional accent and a determination to talk about little except lifting weights, Newcastle United and violence when in the gym, I was able to share – or appear to share, superficially – many of the traits and tastes associated with working class masculine identity.

My working-class identity was especially important during the first months of fieldwork, when access and key-relationships were being established in the field with participants. Access to Gym D’s community would have been challenging, even denied, had I been seen as middleclass. Indeed, the small subset of upwardly mobile users of Gym D I encountered (Giazitzoglu, 2014 a) were
unpopular, even rejected, among Gym D’s wider community, and seen as ‘posh’ and ‘snooty’ on account of their middleclass identities. Had I also been seen as ‘one of them posh expletive’, I would have failed to fully integrated among the gym’s, predominant socially-immobile, working class users.

During the first few months of my fieldwork, it was assumed by most of Gym D’s users that I, like other users of Gym D (Giazitzoglu, 2014b), lived on welfare benefits, due to me being able, as an unfunded PhD student, to train frequently, without the apparent imposition of working patterns infringing on my time. I was genuinely financially poor while researching. Other gym-users noticed that I relied on lifts or public transport to get to the gym rather than my own car, and that I often had to pay my weekly gym fees in loose-change, was rarely able to afford dietary supplements, and typically wore old clothes. This was born of financial necessity, but functioned, serendipitously, to further affirm my insider status: I was seen as a typical gym user, not just on the basis of a shared generic working class identity, but a shared working class identity defined by relative poverty.

**Gender and Race**

My insider-position in Gym D was also built on gender and race. Gym D’s users are almost entirely male and overwhelming white. My maleness and whiteness - as specific, objective, non-performed aspects of my identity - bolstered my status as an insider among Gym D’s community further, and complimented the more temporal, learned and performed aspects of my working-class identity, such as my exaggerated regional accent and the wearing of specific clothing.
Embodiment

However, it was my embodiment and ability to participate in bodybuilding that played the most important part in me gaining the status of insider in Gym D. Muscles function as a form of cultural capital in Gym D. If a user (or researcher) enters Gym D without an appropriate level of muscular capital they will probably be denied access to Gym D’s community and equipment, and encouraged to body-build at another gym. I saw this in practice during my fieldwork, when a group of local teenagers tried to use Gym D but were told on arrival by the gym’s owner to ‘come back in ten years when you don’t look like a load of skinny expletive’. Such events help Gym D to retain its locally elite status: Gym D is a place for ‘serious’ as oppose to casual bodybuilders to visit.

I learned to bodybuild as a teenager in Gym D in the late 1990s. When I moved away from Dramen and Gym D in the early 2000s, I continued to put the bodybuilding principles I learned in Gym D into practice. Consequently I returned to Gym D as a researcher in 2007 encased within a physique that was similar to many in Gym D’s community. Because I had a level of muscular capital when I entered Gym D as an ethnographer, I was able to access and integrate myself among Gym D’s community easily, on the basis of a solidarity built on embodiment. I always wore a vest or tight t-shirts when body-building in Gym D, to visually expose my embodied capital to participants. When in Gym D, I lifted not just heavy weights but heavy weights in a controlled manner, as this constitutes ‘good form’ in the bodybuilding community. I was always a willing participant in the impromptu strength-tests that Gym D’s users challenge each other to, such as ‘who can bench, squat and deadlift the most’. The fact that I added over a stone of muscular capital to my physique during my fieldwork, as a result of the many hours I spent observing and thus bodybuilding in Gym D, functioned to affirm my insider position in the gym further, as my time in the field evolved. Once, I
fainted after a heavy squat session. On another occasion, I pushed a training partner to the point he vomited. These acts took on meaning in the field, and cemented my insider position further.

**Practical Lessons Learned**

Gym D and Dramen are places that are defined by ‘a cultural knowledge of the way to become and be a working-class man in this place’ (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2007: 350). By having, and utilizing, cultural knowledge about how ‘to be a man’ in Gym D – especially a man who lifts and looks like he lifts in Gym D - I was able to function as an ethnographic insider.

Why was this insider position relevant in terms of data elicitation? Two reasons. First, during participant observations, participants acted naturally and authentically in front of me. Hence, I was able to induce findings about participants that were based on participants’ natural actions, rather than on participants modifying their actions to suit me as an observer, who they did not recognize or trust. This meant the potential pollution of data that other gym ethnographers may experience, critiqued earlier in this article, didn’t occur in my fieldwork.

Second, 42 users of Gym D volunteered to take part in research interviews. It is unlikely that such a high level of participants would have agreed to be researched through interviews had they not known and trusted me. During interviews, participants spoke to me candidly and in great qualitative detail, as illustrated in the below extract, describing a participants’ cycle of steroid use:

Participant: ‘In the Winter I am all about getting mass and size so I’m on the Dinabol, the Oxymetholone and some basic testosterone like some Sustanon, but this time of
year (Spring) I start cutting down that size and dieting ... so I’ve just got myself some Trembelone jabs, some Winstrol tablets and some propionate testosterone.’

Author: ‘Why do you use propionate testosterone this time of year and not in the winter?’

Participant: ‘cause it’s faster and there is no water in it, so you look leaner, and I don’t want to hold water this time of year’.

Without an insider status, data elicited would have been less authentic, natural and rich. In turn, my written ethnographic account would have been less valid. Many anecdotes I received from participants about their training started with phrases like ‘I can tell you this stuff because you know the crack’, ‘I’m only going to tell you this because I know you’re like me when it comes to weights so won’t judge me’ and ‘if you weren’t a good bencher (competent bench-presser) I wouldn’t bother saying what I’m about to say’. The use of these phrases illustrates the extent of my insider status further, and how such positively impacted fieldwork by allowing me insights into my participants’ views and experiences that would have otherwise been closed off.

**Challenges**

I have so far shown the benefits that being an insider-ethnographer constructed in the field. However, my insider status also threw up challenges. One challenge related to ethics. Because of my insider-status, I was exposed to various situations when participants were engaged in immoral and illegal behavior, and where there was peer-pressure for me to ‘join in’. These situations ranged from taking part in binge drinking sessions, visiting lap dancing clubs and ‘not running’ from threats of violence from other working class males when socializing with participants in the night time economy (which
I did willingly, to having a small group of participants ask me to inject them with steroids and attend an English Defense League (a far-right political organization popular among some white working class men) march (which I refused to do). During these times, I accepted that while ‘good data’ would probably emerge from engaging in such acts, morally the price of good data was not worth paying. Thus, in these situations, I retracted my willingness to be an insider.

A further challenge relates to objectivity. The most common, long-standing criticism of the insider ethnographer is that they are too close to their participants to analyze the data they induct with impartiality (Merton, 1972) and produce a written ethnographic account that is truly empirically valid. During my fieldwork, I asked myself: am I too immersed in Gym D’s community to present a rigorous, objective interpretation of what I’ve seen, heard and recorded? Although ethnography is subjective and not a hard-science, a level of ‘scientific’ rationality is needed for the data an ethnographer elicits to be theoretically contextualized (Burawoy, 1998). Initially, I believed that I managed to find a balance between my positions as an insider ethnographer and someone who was obliged to ‘scientifically’ contextualize his data.

This balance stemmed from two factors. Firstly, I taught at a local university while conducting my ethnography. Exposure to the middleclass cultural practices of a university meant I was able to position and juxtapose the culture of working class hyper-masculinity I observed in Gym D with the sort of masculinity I saw performed by male students and academics. Exposure to two polarized worlds during the research process reminded me that many elements of the masculinity I observed in Gym D should not be interpreted uncritically: what constitutes ‘normal’ in Gym D is not inherently normal. Secondly when I wrote up my PhD (from January 2009 – January 2010), and thereby ordered and analyzed the data I inducted, I rarely attended Gym D. Instead, I continued bodybuilding
in a different, less extreme, public gymnasium. This was further conducive to me analyzing and framing my elicited data with a level of impartiality and distance; something sustained immersion in Gym D may not have allowed. The fact that it seemed unusual, upon joining a new gym, to not see steroid needles in the bathroom demonstrated, reflexively, how institutionised I’d become by Gym D and my insider position in it.

Despite these claims to ethnographic objectivity, a key event made me question how impartial I was when analyzing my data and researching Gym D. This event occurred during my PhD viva, when one examiner indicated I displayed a preference towards a group of men who use Gym D. This group, who I labeled Traditionalists, are the group in Gym D who are most likely to indulge in ‘banter’ around themes like sexism and racism; which often made me feel uncomfortable. Yet, despite my aversion to what some of the group’s members said, it seems I empathized with this group more than the other two typologies of masculinity (Changers and Drifters) I identified in the field and discussed in my written account. Indeed, when recently looking over my research diary, I sometimes used ‘we’ when discussing the Traditionalists, although I never used the term ‘we’ when discussing the Changers or Drifters. In terms of observing and analyzing the Traditionalists, I apparently crossed the line between being an impartial ethnographer observing gym-users and a gym user who saw the Traditionalists in a somewhat romantic way, and who turned, when producing a written account of the Traditionalists, something of a blind-eye to aspects of the Traditionalists’ masculinity that I found unpleasant.

**Conclusion**

I have shown how being a man of the ‘right’ social class, gender, ethnicity, physiology and
bodybuilding credentials meant I could access Gym D’s community, build key relationships in the gym and observe participants who would ordinarily be closed off from ethnographers. This allowed me to function as an insider ethnographer and study an elusive group of men. Now, I want to reflect a little more on the closeness of the relationships I formed in the field as a result of my insider position.

It is said that the:

‘necessity to form relationships with the researched is often ignored in research textbooks or training … there has always been considerable divergence between how sociological research has actually been done and what was found in textbooks … methods texts still remain relatively silent on the way in which fieldwork affects the ethnographer and the ways in which the ethnographer affects the field’ (Lumsden, 2009: 504).

Indeed, nothing I learned from textbooks or training prepared me for the reality of the field, especially the emotional costs associated with fieldwork.

Upon leaving Gym D, I felt somewhat lost and alienated. I missed those I had observed and lifted weights with. Participants missed me, too. Post-fieldwork, many participants sent me text-messages complaining that I had ‘left them’. On the occasions I bump into participants now, they sometimes seem insulted that I no longer use Gym D. Others are pleased I left Gym D. Family members commented that ‘I changed’ when using Gym D, and even accused me of becoming ‘like the thugs at the gym you started hanging out with’ during my ethnography. Insider ethnography consumes the life of the researcher. It is, I believe, the ultimate means of data collection and field experience. No other method provides the opportunity to understand a people and cultural phenomenon in as much detail. However, the commitment required for the method to work creates profound emotional
Those reading this may be thinking about conducting ethnographic research, or perhaps be involved in ethnographic research. I hope my experiences of researching Gym D will be of relevance to you, and make you reflect on how your identity may impact your fieldwork, and the extent you want to be an insider. I encourage a full insider status. Yet, remember that while there are benefits of being an insider, there are disadvantages too!

**Exercises and Discussion Questions**

1> Is insider ethnography needed in all fields?

2> Do you agree that gender, race, class and embodiment were needed for access in Gym D, as the author suggests?

3> Did the author have a moral obligation to stay in Gym D after his fieldwork, so as not to upset his participants?

4> How else might impartiality have been ensured when analyzing data and writing up research?

**Further Readings**


Web Resources

PhD thesis this case is based on:

Giazitzoglu, A. 2010. Working out our melancholy, our muscles and our masculinities: depression, anomie, alienation, commodity fetishism, body-modification and masculinity in a de-industrialised Northumbrian Town. PhD thesis submitted to Durham University, Department of Sociology.

References


