

Fieldwork - What is it and how can it be used to acquire new knowledge?



Lecture in SOS2160

- Knowledge Development in Social Work
- Hans Wiggo Kristiansen
- Monday April 15th 2024

Participant observation (I)

- What is it?
 - Qualitative research method that involves "collecting data by participating in the daily lives of the people you study" (Fangen 2004, p. 28, *our translation from Norwegian*)
 - "When you perform participant observation, you are performing two forms of action at the same time: You are engaging in interaction with others, while observing what they are doing" (Fangen 2004, p. 29).
- Something other than "pure" observation
 - E.g. observation of the interaction between children and parents in the child welfare service
 - Open, non-participatory observation (example on the next page)

Aline og Frydenberg familieavdeling

Aline og Frydenberg familieavdeling er et senter for foreldre og barn. Vi utreder barns omsorgsbehov og foreldrenes mulighet til å gi barna denne omsorgen. Når det er til barnets beste, og avdelingen har kapasitet, kan avdelingen tilby opphold med vekt på veiledning.

A centre for
parents and
children under
the Child
Welfare Service



Familieavdelingen er omgitt av grøntområder. Bilde: Kristin Jonassen Nordby

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Participant Observation (II)

- "Ethnography" = "writing about people"
 - Wider term
- Advantages compared to other qualitative methods
 - Interviews
 - Short-term and less trust-based relationship
 - More superficial, less in-depth
 - «The looking-good-principle»: They tell you how you SHOULD act, not what they actually do
 - "Speaking by mouth"
 - "Text analysis, literature studies"
 - Only a tiny part of everyday life and professional life is available as text
- My experience with participatory observation
 - Queer men in Santiago de Chile
 - Older queer men in Oslo

Katrine Fangen

A book about
neo-nazis

KATRINE FANGEN
**EN BOK OM
NYNAZISTER**

 Universitetsforlaget

Fieldwork as a research tradition

- Most developed in social anthropology
 - Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942)
 - The outbreak of World War I - on British territory
 - Citizenship of Austria-Hungary
 - Long-term fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands 1915-1917
 - Studies of small-scale, transparent societies
- Field studies in big cities
 - Sociologists, criminologists, urban anthropologists
 - The Chicago school of sociology

Malinowski's
fieldwork on
the Trobriand
Islands

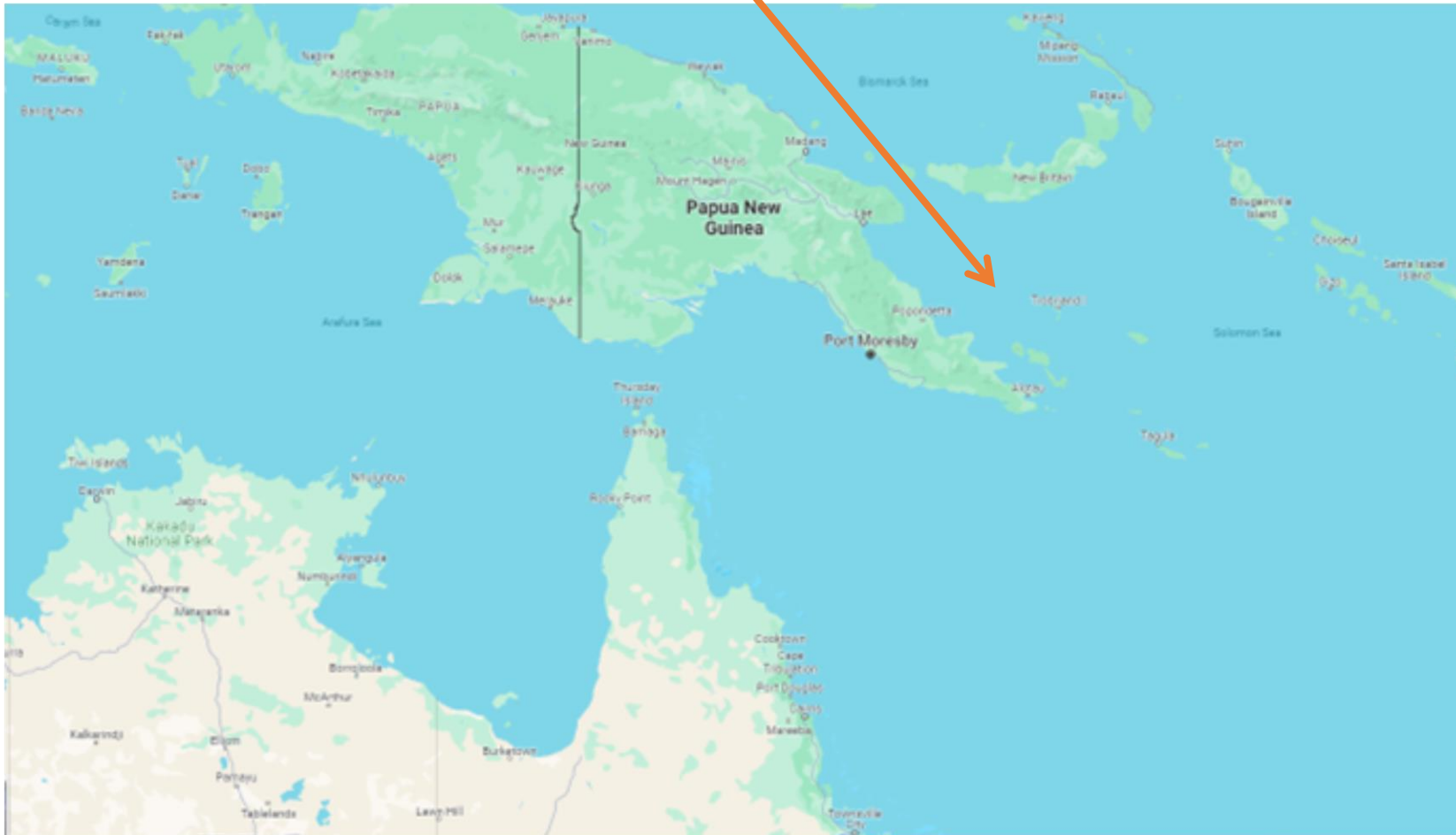
Street Corner Society

THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF
AN ITALIAN SLUM

FOURTH EDITION



William Foote Whyte



Getting access

- Present yourself in a way that creates trust among those you want to connect with
 - Be as open as you can about the purpose of your being there
 - Consider the following situation: What do you think people you meet at Linderud Centre think when five young adults contact them?
- It **is** awkward to do fieldwork!
 - The start of fieldwork among older queer people at the Pub
 - Acute experience of strangeness and vulnerability in the first weeks
 - Who or what am I being seen as?
 - Young adult man trying to hook up?
 - Someone who is after my money?
 - Journalist looking for something scandalous?
 - Use the discomfort in the beginning to learn something!
- It is important that you make notes separately and reflect together after the first sessions of fieldwork



Being present for (some) time

- Must learn to cope with the discomfort
 - "After you have been in the new place for a while, you will understand more, and so will the people you study so that the trust between you and them improves" (Fangen 2010, p. 59).
- Become a stranger that they are confident in
 - "It takes time to build trust that can withstand the various stresses that can come during a fieldwork. You must therefore expect to negotiate for admission many times"(Fangen 2010, s. 60).
 - Often you have to inform and ask for consent again and again and again.
- I was present in the Pub two-five days a week over a period of one year - 119 field visits in total
 - First three weeks: Sat mostly alone, people came up to me
 - Passive, observant role
 - Later: Sat down with people I already knew from before
- Fangen (2010) says that the participants must feel that they get something in return for participating
 - Diffuse social gains (p. 60)
 - Leaving the room with a "young" man
 - Rewarding in itself to be able to tell about one's life
 - Someone outside the environment they could "confide" in
 - Concern for family and inheritance

Look for gatekeepers in the field!

- Gatekeeper: someone who is central to the group you want to study and who can mediate contact (Fangen 2010, s. 67)
 - Preferably a (formal or informal) leadership figure
- Try to find people who can help you get into the group/environment
 - Often not among those who first contact you
- One of last year's groups: Got in touch with a chairman of one of the blocks in the neighborhood that was also central to a residents' action and Facebook group
 - May also be: Café employees at the center, security guards, sports and leisure club leaders.

Write good field notes along the way!

- Write down as specifically as possible what you see and what happens around you
 - The journey out to where you're going to be and your first impressions
 - Describe places - what does it look like where the fieldwork takes place?
- It is a good idea to write down key words while doing the participating observation
 - But it can be disturbing even if those you observe are informed and agree
 - Taking small breaks, taking notes on the toilet, taking notes on the subway on the way home
- If possible, you should always write up or type out the notes the same evening or the next morning
 - What happened today? What did I see?
 - Conversations with people you've met
 - Things you are surprised by
- DO NOT wait to write until you are about to start writing the actual report!!
 - It is the FIELD NOTES that will be your research material from participatory observation

