

Obtrusiveness as Strategy in Ethnographic Research

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Unlocking the Iron Cage, Michael Schwalbe's 1996 ethnography of the men's movement, is in many ways a classic ethnographic account, involving almost three years of intensive participant-observation. But the study is innovative—and even daring—in its strategies for establishing textual authority. Schwalbe's claims rest primarily on his status as a movement insider and full participant. Yet the credibility this provides also raises questions about Schwalbe's ability to provide a critical analytic account of the movement. Can he be an objective observer of a group in which he is also a fully immersed participant? Schwalbe is innovative in his willingness to exploit, rather than simply minimize, the tension between participation and observation. While in most of the book Schwalbe follows conventional ethnographic practice by trying to minimize his obtrusiveness as a research presence, at several key moments in the study he emerges to provoke critical debate among the men. Without these passages, Schwalbe's empirical claims would lose some of their most convincing sources of support. While researcher obtrusiveness is usually considered a methodological flaw in ethnography, Schwalbe's work manages to turn it into an asset, enhancing both his data-gathering and his credibility as a critical authority. In the process, he creates a distinctive and compelling methodological style.

KEY WORDS: ethnography; methods; Schwalbe; men's movement.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnography as a method relies heavily on the personal experiences and perceptions of individual researchers (Stewart 1998; Clifford 1983). The core methodological technique is participant-observation, in which researchers immerse themselves in the life of a group and attempt to interpret what they experience. The

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goal is to emerge with a credibly authentic account of participants' behavior and beliefs. Making ethnography credible depends on walking a fine line between participation and observation: being immersed enough to know what you're talking about while being separate enough to offer a critical analysis. This is one of the classic trade-offs that characterize most forms of social scientific inquiry (Weick 1979).

Just as ethnographers must gain the trust of research participants (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995), they must also gain the trust of readers. Thus, ethnographic texts can be interpreted in light of their persuasive strategies: the techniques they employ to convince readers of the authenticity and reliability of their accounts. On one hand, as Clifford writes, depth of participation in a group is a signal of researchers' credibility: "The predominant mode of modern fieldwork authority is signaled: 'You are there because I was there'" (1983, p. 118). Thus, the more time a researcher spends with a group, the farther he or she gets into the "backstage" area (Goffman 1959), and the more convincing the resulting account (Glesne and Peshkin 1999).

On the other hand, credible ethnography also requires evidence of analytic distance on the part of the researcher. Credible ethnographies must be "more than a personal document" (Stoddart 1986, p. 104). Researchers must demonstrate an ability to be both immersed in a group and separate enough to view it with a critical eye. This poses an inevitable dilemma for which there is no entirely satisfactory solution (Jorgenson 1989).

How do we determine when the right balance has been struck between participation and observation? This article will examine how one sociologist attempted to write a credible ethnographic account that was strong on both participation and analysis, but which also broke methodological rules to achieve this balance. *Unlocking the Iron Cage*, Michael Schwalbe's 1996 ethnography of the men's movement, is in many ways a classic ethnographic account, involving almost three years of intensive participant-observation. But Schwalbe's study is special because it makes a daring trade-off between establishing the authenticity of the study and the credibility of the author's critical analysis.

This article will argue that Schwalbe makes his work compelling and credible by subverting methodological rules about avoiding obtrusive research techniques or researcher presence that might bias the data collected (Stoddart 1986). Indeed, Schwalbe flies in the face of these rules by offering a feminist sociological point of view during men's group meetings—often to the dismay of other participants. While unconventional, and sometimes unintended, these provocations produce some of his most interesting and convincing data: Perhaps more importantly, they demonstrate Schwalbe's willingness to act as a critical analyst of the movement—an essential component of his credibility as a researcher.

MASCULINITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS: SCHWALBE'S CLAIMS ABOUT THE MEN'S MOVEMENT

According to Schwalbe, the men's movement of the 1980s and 1990s was a loosely organized group of as many as 100,000 American men. Their search to redefine masculinity was popularized by bestselling books, such as *Iron John* (Bly 1990) and *Fire in the Belly* (Keen 1991), and accompanied by intense media attention. The movement centered around meetings of men who engaged in drumming and storytelling rituals, role-playing exercises, and spiritual devotions in an effort to find an authentic masculinity, unburdened by connotations of dominance and competition.

Schwalbe studied the movement near the apex of its cultural visibility, during the early 1990s. Though the movement was relatively small, it was influential in provoking public debate. For the most part, Schwalbe notes, response to the men's movement from outsiders was negative. The movement's use of drumming circles, sweat lodges, psychodrama and "bonding" exercises were easy targets for mockery. As Schwalbe points out, the media typically portrayed the men as "wimpy" or, at best, seduced by self-serving New Age rhetoric. Others saw real danger in the movement's suggestion that men suffered as much as women from gender oppression. Indeed, the movement sometimes portrayed women as oppressors of men, in the form of controlling mothers or demanding wives and girlfriends.

Unlocking the Iron Cage is a compelling work of sociology in large part because it persuades us to take seriously a movement that was mocked and trivialized on a national scale. It argues that there were progressive aspects to the men's movement—aspects visible only to participants. While acknowledging many of the criticisms leveled by outsiders, Schwalbe's case rests on his status as an insider. From this perspective, he argues that the men's movement made a positive contribution both to participants and to the cultural environment through its questioning of masculinity and its attempt to restore the social role of ritual.

As Schwalbe points out, masculinity and other high-status social characteristics often enjoy a kind of immunity from analysis. They are considered "essential" or "natural" (Bem 1993), the standard against which other social positions are examined. Thus, to begin asking "What is a man?" is to attack the privilege of being "natural" and unexamined. Schwalbe points out that the movement broke even more radical ground by popularizing alternate ways of being a man that didn't involve dominance or authority. As a result, Schwalbe writes:

The men thus discovered that they didn't have to live out traditional masculinity, nor feel ashamed for refusing to do so. Instead they learned that they could cooperate with other men to create at least temporary communities where stoicism, dominance, and heterosexual prowess were not the measures of manhood (Schwalbe 1996a, p. 243).

By asking questions about what had formerly been "natural," the men were chipping away at the pillars of a patriarchal social system.

Secondly, Schwalbe notes that the rituals on which the men's movement was based were part of an equally radical attempt to "re-enchanted the world" (1996a, p. 33). In effect, the men were bucking the master trend toward rationalization that Weber had noted at the beginning of the 20th century—a brave act, and one that would almost inevitably expose them to ridicule. Schwalbe points out that while most of the men participating in the men's movement were at some level successful in negotiating their way through a rationalized world—at school, at work, or both—they also felt injured and alienated by that system. They felt that rationality cut them off from themselves and from other people—particularly other men. So they appropriated rituals from Native American cultures—drumming circles and sweat lodges—and from group therapy, such as role-playing exercises, in order to build a sense of masculine community. While these efforts sometimes appeared awkward, Schwalbe points out that participants experienced this move as a refreshing departure from their training in appropriate masculine behavior.

Schwalbe's critical claims are primarily directed toward showing how the movement fell short of fulfilling its progressive potential. While he had ample opportunity to join other critics in pointing out the ridiculous aspects of the movement—as when he found himself in a sweat lodge next to a man who was "gobbling like a turkey" (1996b, p. 73)—he focuses instead on its ideological limitations. The problem crystallizes around two issues: "therapeutic individualism" (1996a, p. 214) and "strategic anti-intellectualism" (*ibid.*, p. 147). Both terms refer to the way the movement stopped short of acknowledging the political, or transpersonal, aspects of its assumptions and actions, and steadfastly rejected any attempt to point out these implications. These issues become the focal points of Schwalbe's methodological challenge.

MAKING THE CLAIMS CREDIBLE

In choosing the men's movement as the subject of his study, Schwalbe faced an uphill battle for credibility. First and foremost, he had to convince readers that there was a sociologically interesting story in a movement that had already been trivialized and dismissed. What could be said that hadn't already been said about these men?

Schwalbe makes three related methodological assertions to bolster the authenticity of this account. First, and most importantly, he notes that his study involved long-term, in-depth observation. Unlike the hit-and-run critiques produced by outsiders, Schwalbe's book is the culmination of three years of active participation in the movement. Second, Schwalbe notes that he purposefully includes a high level of detail in recounting conversations and events; as he puts it, "Reporting these matters in detail is necessary . . . to establish the credibility of my analysis" (1996a, p. 12). Third, he argues that the credibility of his account is

enhanced by focusing on the rank and file members of the movement, rather than the high-profile leadership. While critics of the movement homed in on celebrity leaders like poet Robert Bly and psychologist James Hillman, Schwalbe argues that the true social meaning of the men's movement can be located only among the ordinary participants.

These three elements of methodological strategy are intertwined in the sense that Schwalbe himself becomes an ordinary participant, and provides detailed accounts of his activities. This was in part a requirement imposed on him by movement leaders. Because the men's movement had been vilified by outsiders, members were understandably suspicious of being studied; while they did not object to Schwalbe's professional interest in the movement, they required him to be a full participant as well.

Fortunately, this coincided with Schwalbe's personal interests. He explains in the introductory chapter that he was struggling at the time with the kinds of issues the men's movement sought to address, including problems in expressing emotion, forming satisfying relationships with other men, and dealing with conflicted feelings about masculinity. These genuine commonalities of interest allowed him to enter a somewhat defensive group without resorting to the kind of deception that has characterized researcher behavior in other studies of marginalized communities (e.g., Humphreys 1971; Festinger, Riecken, and Schacter 1956).

PROVOCATION AS METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGY?

The three components of Schwalbe's methodological strategy—intense personal participation in the movement, detailed reporting of data, and focus on the rank and file members—come together in the most innovative portions of the study, those in which Schwalbe intervenes to change the course of group meetings and provides detailed accounts of members' responses to these disruptions. Though there are only two such incidents in the book, they are among the most compelling and distinctive features of the study.

In one case, Schwalbe challenges a group of men who are discussing how they feel underappreciated by their wives when it comes to housework. Several remark that they do all the outdoor maintenance and can't understand why the women in their lives resent doing the indoor chores, like cleaning bathrooms. In the half-page of dense, extra-small print required to relate this anecdote, Schwalbe's response takes up about fifty percent of the word count. He tells the men that while he once felt as they do, he had learned that different household chores have different emotional connotations; for example, cleaning bathrooms might symbolize feminine subservience in a way that pruning trees would not. As a result of this intervention, Schwalbe notes, several of the men seemed to change their perspective on the issue. He writes, "I liked this conversation because I got

to play professor and also because it showed that the men are moveable on these matters" (1996a, p. 194).

In another instance, Schwalbe provides twenty pages of a transcript from a large meeting in which he derailed a group discussion about a Grimm's fairy tale. The story, "Faithful John," involves the abduction and sexual conquest of a princess by a young king.² The discussion among the 120 or so participants centered on whether the princess was raped, because the whole situation occurred against her will, or whether she was seduced and really wanted to be "swept off her feet." The discussion ultimately comes down on the side of seduction; as one of the leaders puts it, in all seriousness, "There's this real close connection between rape and rapture" (ibid., p. 160).

Though a few participants protest the trivialization of rape in the discussion, the debate heats up only when Schwalbe emerges about halfway through the dialogue to provide an articulate and sustained feminist argument. Unlike the other dissenting comments, Schwalbe's words are met with intense hostility by the leaders, as well as a chorus of moans and other protests from the regular participants. Schwalbe explains this reaction by saying, "My statements angered the men because I was mucking up the mythopoetic works by raising issues of gender politics (which were deemed not to exist in the mythological realm) and because my remarks threatened the moral identity the men were trying to construct . . . This was the last thing they had come to a mythopoetic gathering to hear" (ibid., p. 173). Clearly, his comments constituted a significant disruption in the meeting.

In one sense, some kind of researcher intervention in events seems inevitable in participant-observation. All researchers, to some extent, disrupt the settings they enter (Glesne and Peshkin 1999). They can be disruptive through their data-gathering techniques, or just by entering the field as strangers who must be introduced and assimilated to some degree.

However, Schwalbe expresses real reservations about the confounding effect his presence as a participant has on the data. In the introduction, he repeatedly makes the point that he wanted to "avoid disrupting the natural flow of action" (1996a, p. 11) in the setting. Indeed, he takes pains to describe how unobtrusive he was as an observer. For example, he notes that he blended in demographically with the other participants as a white male, roughly in middle age; even his note-taking was unobtrusive, since the other men frequently wrote in their journals at movement events. He adds that "eventually the men stopped seeing me as a sociologist and saw me as just another participant" (ibid., p. 9). Finally, while he disclosed his identity as a researcher to the men he interviewed, he avoided mentioning his

²The king, who falls in love with the princess's portrait, journeys to her homeland and has his servant—Faithful John—lure her onto the king's boat with promises of golden treasure. Once she is on board, the king takes the princess below deck, while Faithful John orders the boat to return immediately to the king's territory. The princess, once she becomes aware of the ruse, is terrified and miserable; but she is ultimately persuaded to marry the king.

project to other participants, "since to do so would have been disruptive" (ibid., p. 10). In other words, Schwalbe seems to have cared about minimizing the impact of his presence on what he observed.

The passages in *Unlocking the Iron Cage* in which Schwalbe assumes the role of critic and provocateur beg several fundamental questions about the research. What are we to make of Schwalbe's provocations in light of his stated desire to be unobtrusive? How are we to interpret data that has clearly been shaped by his presence? These issues can be informed by a brief review of methodological conventions in ethnographic research.

METHODOLOGICAL CONVENTIONS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

The authority of an ethnographic text as a piece of social science depends in part on the researcher's demonstrations of methodological awareness (Marshall and Rossman 1989). That is, there is usually a sense that some sort of rules are at work in the way data are gathered, interpreted and presented. Though there is a great deal of writing about ethnographic methodology, there are few hard and fast rules. Ethnographers generally emphasize the artful and idiosyncratic nature of their research, and are suspicious of attempts to constrain it methodologically (Stewart 1998). However, there are a few widely accepted guidelines for what Stoddart calls "adequate ethnography" (1986, p. 105)—that is, ethnography that has credibility as a description of lived experience.

Among the handful of rules, one holds that immersion in the field as a participant is a necessity. As Jorgenson puts it, "The most direct route to the truth is for the researcher to experience the phenomenon of interest—to 'become the phenomenon'" (1989, p. 29). Clearly, Schwalbe meets this requirement. However, he runs into problems with another widely accepted methodological convention: the notion that participant-observers should minimize their impact on the data, becoming as unobtrusive as possible in the field (Stewart 1998; Jorgenson 1989). Unobtrusiveness means that the research itself did not create the data. "Adequate ethnography" must demonstrate that the data were not biased (or generated) by the presence of the researcher nor by the use of a particular research technique. These are known as the "problem of presence" and "methodogenesis," respectively (Stoddart 1986). We specifically need to know that the data were not shaped by the research in a way that affects the key claims of the study (Stewart 1998; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). These rules can be summarized as follows:

The good ethnographer regards his or her own presence in a domain as potentially tainting of its natural state . . . The good ethnographer is attentive to the possibility that techniques of data gathering may create the data gathered (Stoddart 1986, pp. 105–106).

If methodological texts are any indication of what actually happens in the field, most research attempts to minimize the obtrusiveness of both the researcher and the

data-gathering techniques. Indeed, many texts on ethnographic research methods offer suggestions as to how researchers can successfully “blend in” and naturalize their presence for participants (Glesne and Peshkin 1999; Lofland and Lofland 1995). While it is acknowledged that research cannot be completely unobtrusive, this condition of near-invisibility is taken as the ideal state for which ethnographers should strive. Schwalbe’s work clearly does not attain this state.

PROVOCATION WITH A PURPOSE

In considering why Schwalbe might have chosen to work partly against the grain of methodological convention, it is important to consider the intense methodological self-consciousness of his book. *Unlocking the Iron Cage* leads with its methodology; the methods discussion takes up a full twenty-five percent of the page count in the introductory chapter. Thus, it is highly unlikely that Schwalbe became an obtrusive presence in the field—and then recounted the incidents in great detail in the text—due to methodological ignorance or insensitivity. On the contrary, these appear to be deliberate and considered methodological strategies. This section will explore Schwalbe’s explicit and implicit reasons for pursuing this course.

Schwalbe’s methodological contrarianism accomplishes three things. The first two are explicit in the text: He uses the provocations as a rich source of data whose detail contributes to the overall persuasiveness of his account; in addition, he wants to challenge the men’s movement to get past its current limitations by confronting unexamined premises. The final motivation is implicit in the text: Because Schwalbe has an avowed personal involvement in the movement, his provocations serve to reassure readers of his credibility as a critical observer. Each of these claims is discussed in detail below.

Provocation as Data Generation

Since participant-observers cannot completely “blend in” to the field, there is a useful literature advising ethnographers on how to use their obtrusiveness as a data-gathering opportunity (e.g., Horowitz 1986; Jorgenson 1989). But this attempt to make the best of the inevitable is quite different from Schwalbe’s approach, which is distinctive in its willingness to invite and exploit—rather than minimize—the tensions between participation and observation. While largely maintaining the role of observer, Schwalbe positions himself at crucial moments in the study as a catalyst, eliciting reactions from other participants. Rather than using himself as a source of data, as in some recent ethnographic accounts, Schwalbe enters the account only to generate data from others. This self-placement in the text allows

him to retain credibility with readers by emphasizing his independence from the group in which he is immersed. On the other hand, his extended participation in the movement gives his criticisms additional weight compared to those leveled previously by outsiders.

The data-gathering benefits of Schwalbe’s strategy are most evident in the “Faithful John” episode, where he justifies his inclusion of the twenty-page transcript by noting that “because the discussion revealed so much about the gender politics of the mythopoetic teachers and men, it is reproduced below in its entirety” (1996a, p. 154). In particular, he writes that the hostility that greets his comments reveals the deep investment many participants had in protecting the moral status of masculinity. Within the “biological essentialist” (Bem 1993) interpretive framework that informs the men’s movement, the categories “male” and “female” are considered natural and immutable. This perspective naturalizes gender difference, endowing male dominance with “an eternal, sacred quality” (Schwalbe 1996a, p. 221). The transcript shows us how the men resist Schwalbe’s repeated attempts to offer a non-essentialist, sociological interpretation of the “Faithful John” story—an interpretation in which the king, as the symbolic representative of masculinity, comes across as a sinister figure.

Perhaps most importantly, from the standpoint of persuasiveness, Schwalbe’s breach of movement norms brings out minority viewpoints that were previously obscured by the conformist atmosphere of the meeting. Several men approach him after the discussion to thank him for saying what they were too timid to say in front of the large group. Other members attempt to repair the breach Schwalbe has created in the group by reassuring Schwalbe that they respect him for his courage in taking an unpopular stand. Thus, the incident enables Schwalbe to present the men’s movement in all its texture and complexity—not a monolith, but a diverse group of individuals with some shared goals and some important differences of opinion. These shadings lend authenticity and credibility to Schwalbe’s account.

Secondarily, the passages showing Schwalbe’s role as catalyst bolster the persuasiveness of his account by providing data needed to support two central claims of the study. Both of these claims concern progressive or redeeming aspects of the men’s movement that were neglected by prior observers. First, Schwalbe argues, the men’s movement is an attempt to reformulate the meaning of masculinity in positive terms. By showing us the seemingly disproportionate reaction to his intervention in the “Faithful John” discussion, Schwalbe makes real for readers the men’s intense desire to feel better about themselves—to find a way of being men that does not inevitably involve the guilt of being an “oppressor.” They want the king to be a king, not a thug. This commitment to defend the fairy tale, to prioritize the symbolic, supports Schwalbe’s second contention about the men’s desire to “re-enchant the world” through storytelling and ritual. Similarly, the men’s willingness to overlook his provocation in order to repair the group’s cohesiveness

bolsters Schwalbe's argument about one of the primary goals of the movement's "strategic anti-intellectualism": to build community among men.

Provocation as Constructive Engagement

Schwalbe states up front that his intention in writing a book about the men's movement is not just to tell an interesting sociological story, but to change the movement itself. He writes, "My hope is that the mythopoetic men will benefit from having a mirror held up to the shadow side of their activity" (1996a, p. 7). Constructiveness is the key to his strategy. Though he has ample opportunity to ridicule the men's activities, he eschews the cheap shots and instead addresses the core intellectual problems that he sees as preventing the movement from fulfilling its potential. Specifically, he focuses on the issues of "therapeutic individualism" and "strategic anti-intellectualism" that trap the movement in its own unexamined assumptions. Schwalbe writes that "the men examined only as many facts as made them feel better about being men" (*ibid.*, p. 149).

The passages in which Schwalbe intervenes in the "natural flow of action" show him taking obvious satisfaction in changing the minds of other participants. For example, he enjoys the discussion about housework because "it showed that men are moveable on these matters" (*ibid.*, p. 194). Similarly, following the debate over the "Faithful John" story, Schwalbe notes that his statements served to legitimate the feminist viewpoint for some of the participants. Not only do some participants thank him afterwards for voicing opinions they were afraid to express, he also overhears a conversation later in the day in which two men discuss how a woman might feel about the activities in the men's movement. The implication is that Schwalbe's comments encouraged participants to talk and think about women as subjects rather than as symbolic objects.

By showing us his provocations and their effects, Schwalbe supports an important part of his overall argument by showing us that there is genuine progressive potential in the movement. These passages demonstrate his point that the men are not rigid ideologues. Despite their limitations, Schwalbe urges us to take them seriously as they respond to promptings to broaden their perspective.

Provocation as Critical Imperative

Regarded purely in the light of the prescription against researcher obtrusiveness, Schwalbe's behavior would appear to constitute a serious methodological flaw in the study. By provoking debate that would not otherwise have occurred among participants, Schwalbe certainly created some of the data, compromising the "naturalness" of the setting. But his actions also give Schwalbe an opportunity to demonstrate to readers that he is willing to take a critical stance toward his subject—establishing credibility for his account.

This problem of critical credibility arises because of Schwalbe's intense personal involvement in the men's movement. After three years of immersion and commitment, some readers may wonder how Schwalbe can be trusted to provide an account that is "objective" or at least minimally biased. He does his best to convince us that he is a reliable analyst by showing us how he catalyzed critical discussion within meetings.

Schwalbe writes that he was aware that his immersion as a participant might present a problem for his credibility as a critical analyst, noting that he was constantly "torn between participating and observing" (1996a, p. 11). In addition, Schwalbe writes that he found himself under professional pressure to demonstrate objectivity:

My colleagues expected me to talk about the men as Other about whom I had learned curious things, rather than as people whose ideas and practices had affected me. I could not speak my gut truth about what I had learned from the men *without risking my credibility as an objective inquirer* (1996b, p. 70, my emphasis).

While Schwalbe's text does reflect the ways he was affected by participants, his work also develops a critical sociological stance. Intentionally or not, his critical activities help bolster the credibility of his work.

Perhaps as a result of this professional imperative, Schwalbe plays down his presence in the data except when he is playing the role of catalyst for critical discussion. He mentions in passing at the end of the book that he found "comfort," "connection" and "inspiration" in the movement (1996a, p. 244), but there is little evidence to illustrate this part of his experience. We know such data exist because he makes it available in a separate fieldwork account (Schwalbe 1996b). For example, the fieldwork account shows us the intense emotional impact of participating in a small group exercise in which an older man role-played Schwalbe's father. As part of the exercise, Schwalbe expresses his love for his father, and the older man responds, "I love you, Michael"—an experience that brings Schwalbe to tears. Schwalbe writes that this marked a "turning point" in the study:

Previously, I had wondered if the feelings the men expressed at the gatherings were real. My experience in the psychodrama convinced me. If my feelings were real, so were those of the other men (1996b, p. 63).

This passage illustrates a key aspect of Schwalbe's methodological strategy, in that he is able to validate the positive impact of the men's movement through his own experience—an option unavailable to critics who remained on the outside looking in. This experience is essential to Schwalbe's argument against skeptics who saw only the strangeness and comedy of adult men engaging in role-playing, drumming circles and other ritual exercises. Yet we see very little of this part of his experience in the book. Instead, *Unlocking the Iron Cage* gives us a selective picture of Schwalbe's experience—one that bolsters his credibility as a researcher by presenting him in the role of sociological critic.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The passages in *Unlocking the Iron Cage* in which Schwalbe acts as a critical participant serve several important purposes in the study. First, they provide us with data to support his central claims about the men's movement. The data are especially persuasive because they literally speak for themselves. Schwalbe provokes debate and then provides detailed transcripts, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions. This strategy "tears open the textual fabric of the 'other,' and thus also of the interpretive self . . . opening up a closed authority" to reader scrutiny (Clifford 1983, p. 134). Among Schwalbe's most important contributions to the data is to show that the men's movement is not composed of ideologues moving in lockstep; rather, his technique brings out the heterogeneous views of individuals struggling to form a community. This willingness to acknowledge complexity lends immediacy and authenticity to the work. In taking the unorthodox approach of strategic obtrusiveness, Schwalbe supplements rather than abdicates his interpretive role.

Second, these passages establish Schwalbe's position as a critical authority. This offsets questions of credibility that might arise due to his intense personal involvement in the group he is studying. Schwalbe is immersed and emotionally invested in the men's movement: his work involves "mucking around at the place where biography and society meet" (Schwalbe 1995, p. 331). Yet he skillfully places himself in the text so that he maximizes the credibility benefits and minimizes the drawbacks of both the participant and observer roles.

Schwalbe is innovative in his willingness to exploit, rather than simply minimize, the tension between participation and observation. On one hand, he is eager to avoid disrupting the natural flow of events in the men's groups he observes, and careful to assure readers that even his note-taking was unobtrusive. This is the approach sanctioned by most texts on ethnographic methods (e.g., Lofland and Lofland 1995). On the other hand, Schwalbe goes out of his way at several points in the text to show readers how he became a highly obtrusive presence, provoking a response from the other participants. In effect, he shows himself creating the data.

While researcher obtrusiveness is usually considered a methodological flaw, Schwalbe's work manages to turn it into an asset, enhancing both his data gathering and his credibility as a critical authority. His methodological self-consciousness throughout the work points up his unusual approach, illuminating the "ethnographer's path" (Sanjek 1990, p. 398) by reflecting on the processes through which knowledge was created in the field.

Due to the characteristics of Schwalbe's research topic, his study would have been somewhat less persuasive had it not included the passages in which he intervenes in men's movement meetings as a critical catalyst. Allowing the data to speak for itself—albeit in response to his provocation—offers a highly credible supplement to segments of the book which employ more conventional interpretive

techniques. Without those passages, the book would not fail as a work of sociology, but Schwalbe's empirical claims and his analytical authority would lack some of their most compelling sources of support.

Future methodological work might consider whether Schwalbe's strategy could be applied successfully to other ethnographic studies. Encouraging researchers to become more obtrusive in the field would likely meet with strong resistance. However, if researchers accept that most participant-observers are obtrusive to some degree, unavoidably altering the data by their very presence, it might be constructive to consider how to maximize the potential inherent in the situation. Schwalbe's work shows that minimizing the "problem of presence" is not always the optimal approach.

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