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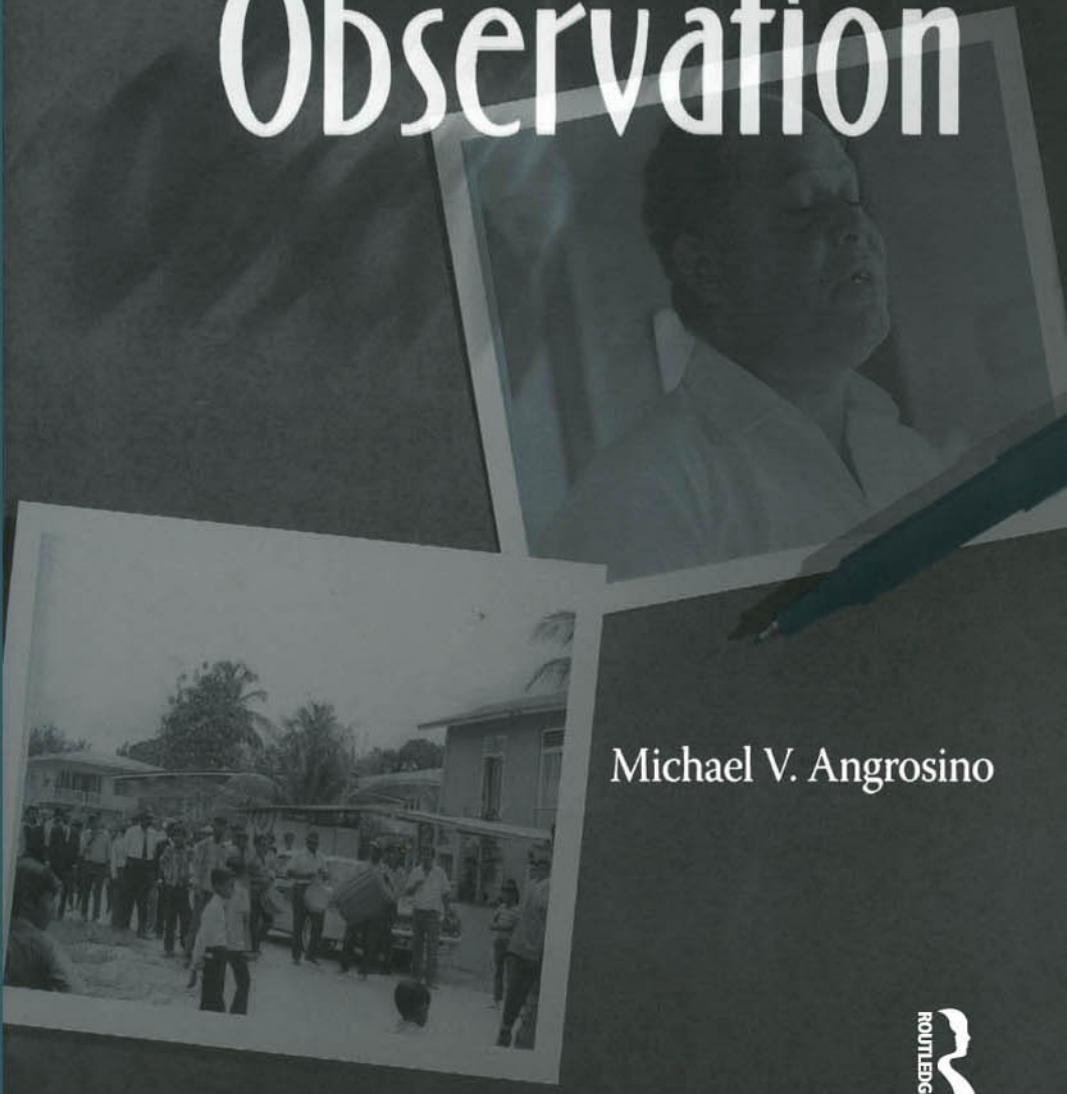
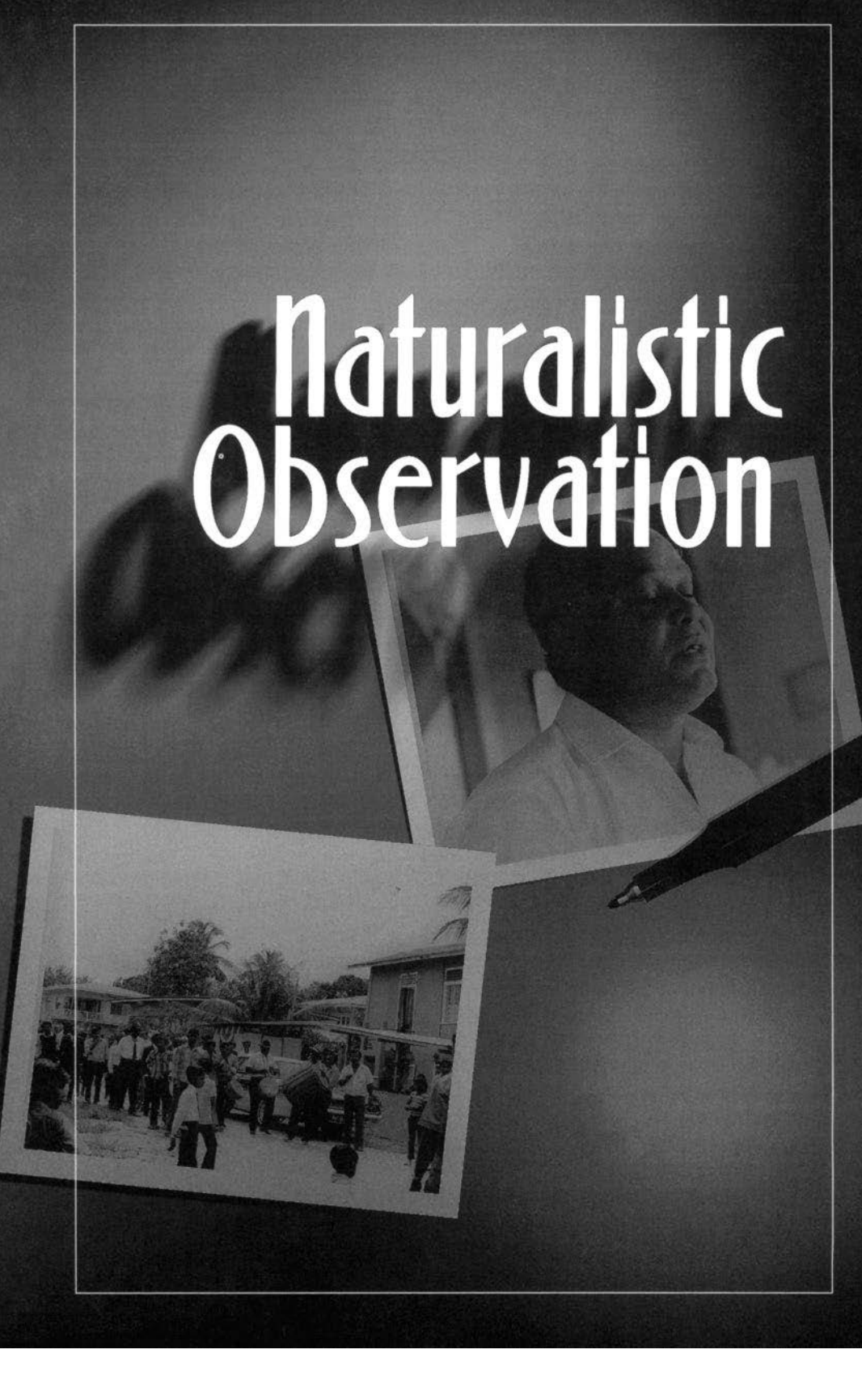


Michael V. Angrosino

ROUTLEDGE

Naturalistic Observation



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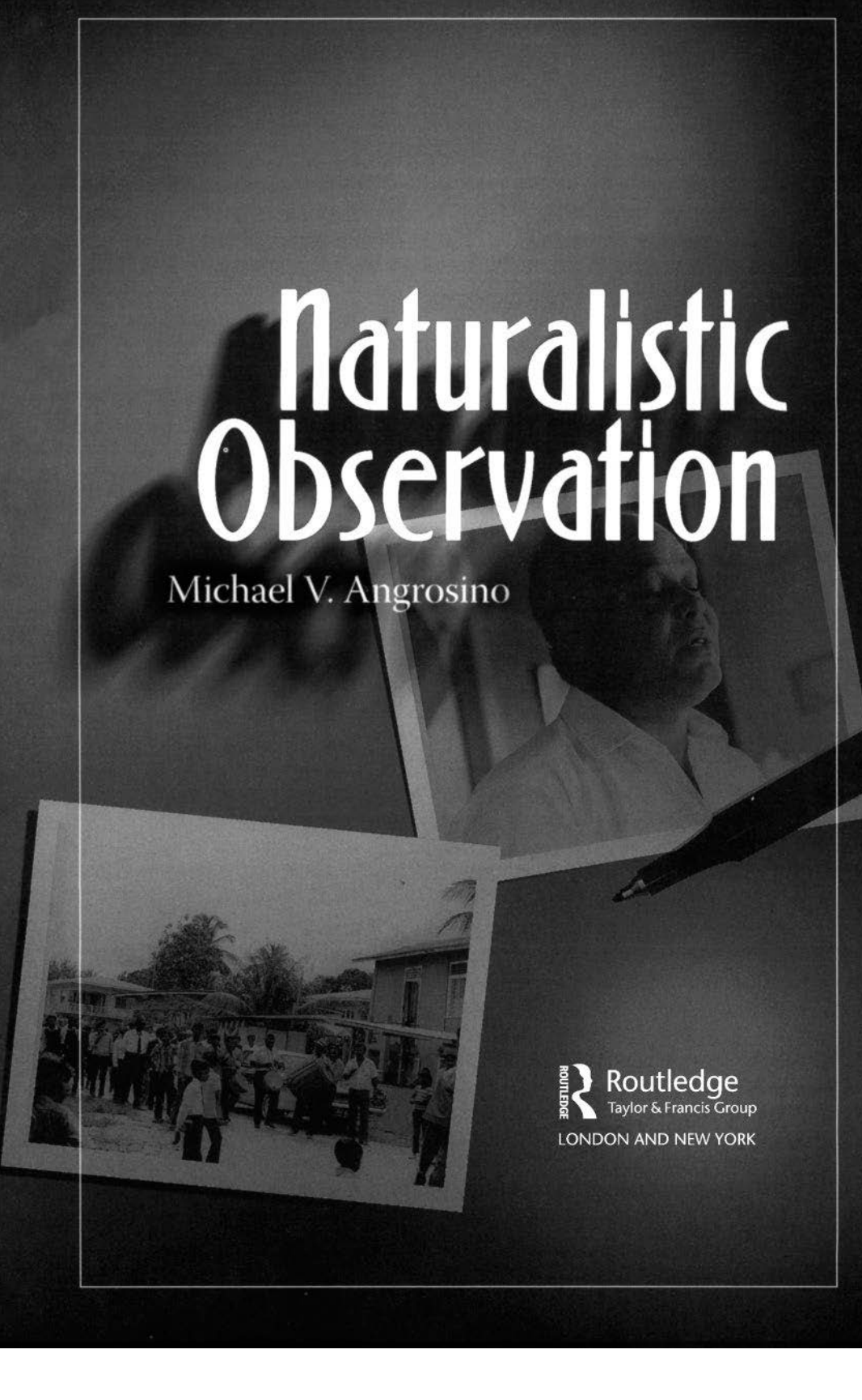

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2007 by Left Coast Press Inc.

Published 2016 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Angrosino, Michael V.

Naturalistic observation / Michael V. Angrosino.

p. cm. -- (Qualitative essentials)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-1-59874-059-2 (hardback : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-59874-059-8 (hardback : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-1-59874-060-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-59874-060-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Ethnology--Methodology. 2. Ethnology--Research. I. Title.

GN345.A56 2007

305.8001--dc22

Designed by Murray Pearson

ISBN 13: 978-1-59874-060-8 (pbk)
ISBN 13: 978-1-59874-059-2 (hbk)

Contents

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Mitch Allen of Left Coast Press, Inc., and to Janice Morse, the general editor of this series for giving me the opportunity to share my enthusiasm for qualitative research in general and for observational techniques in particular. Their very astute and helpful comments kept me on track throughout the process of writing and revising this manuscript.

I also acknowledge my students at the University of South Florida who have engaged me in creative dialogue about qualitative methods over the years and whose needs as budding researchers have shaped my approach to this topic. I also once again thank Petra LeClair for incomparable clerical and editorial assistance.

The photos in this book were taken over the course of several ethnographic visits to Trinidad in the West Indies. Most of them are over thirty years old. As such they predate the current era of informed consent that is discussed in the chapter on ethics, although all the people in the pictures gave me general verbal consent to use their images "for purposes of research." I thank them for their willingness to share their lives with me and, by extension, with the readers of this book.

— Michael V. Angrosino

Chapter One

What Is Naturalistic Observation?

What is Naturalistic Observation?

Qualitative research is a process of inquiry aimed at understanding human behavior by building complex, holistic pictures of the social and cultural settings in which such behavior occurs. It does so by analyzing words rather than numbers, and by reporting the detailed views of the people who have been studied. Such inquiry is conducted in settings where people naturally interact, as opposed to specially designed laboratories or clinical/experimental settings. Qualitative research seeks to understand the what, how, when, and where of an event or an action in order to establish its meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions (Berg, 2004, pp. 2–3; Creswell, 1998, pp. 14–16).

Prominent among the tools of qualitative research is **observation,** characterized by Adler and Adler (1994) as "the fundamental base of all research methods" (p. 389). Quantitative researchers favor observing people in highly controlled settings in which the researchers control all the variables involved, with the aim of experimentally testing specific hypotheses. By contrast, qualitative researchers use observation as a process by which people interacting in their natural settings are studied so that their behaviors and words can be put into their proper context. The descriptive study of people in their natural settings is sometimes referred to as **ethnography** or ethnographic research. Although hypotheses may be derived from naturalistic observations, the observations themselves do not usually arise from a hypothesis-testing model of research. Qualitative researchers may refer to the natural settings where their projects are conducted as "the field," and when they leave the laboratory to do their research, they are said to be conducting **fieldwork.**

It should be emphasized from the outset that naturalistic observation as a tool of research is different from the kinds of casual "seeing" that we do in the course of everyday life, even if it in fact stems from those very ordinary life skills. In order to be useful for research, observation must be **systematic,** which means that it must be conducted carefully, with precise notation that allows for the efficient and orderly retrieval, categorization, and analysis of information (Adler and Adler, 1994). While qualitative researchers tend to avoid predetermining categories of action that can be precisely measured, they are as concerned as their quantitative colleagues with ensuring that observation yields more than haphazard impressions. In everyday language, "observation" usually refers to the use of our visual sense to record and make

sense of information. But in the research context, we must learn to use all of our senses, in order to accurately perceive the whole picture. As Adler and Adler (1994, p. 378) put it, "Observation thus consists of gathering impressions of the surrounding world through all relevant human faculties."

There are three main traditions of observation-based research within qualitative social science: the **non-reactive** (or **unobtrusive**) mode, in which the researcher avoids intervening in the action he or she is observing, the **reactive** mode, in which the researcher intervenes in the action, but only in the role of outside observer, and the **participant** mode, in which the researcher strives to be an active member of the group under study. There are important sub-divisions of these three broad categories that we will discuss in greater detail in a later section. At this point, however, we can say that all forms of qualitative observation-based inquiry are rooted in the researcher's preference for the "natural laboratory." It is assumed that observation of people and events takes place in the settings in which they would naturally occur, and involves those who would naturally take part in them. The aim of qualitative observation research is to capture the essential flow of everyday experience. As such, observation serves the purpose of detecting patterns, concepts, trends, or categories that are taken as meaningful by people in the course of that everyday experience; it does not begin, as does much quantitative inquiry, with patterns, concepts, trends, or categories that emerge from theoretical formulations and take the form of specific hypotheses that can be tested by measuring clearly operationalized variables.

Adler and Adler (1994, p. 378), for example, speak of the "'Click!' experience," which they describe as "a sudden, though minor, epiphany as to the emotional depth or importance of an event or a phenomenon." Real life, in other words, is full of surprises, even for the well trained and experienced researcher. Observation allows the researcher to register that surprise and then ponder the meaning behind the behavior that provoked it. It is my belief that this necessary element of surprise and the experience of epiphany best arise out of personal encounters; it is fine to read about the research of others, but doing research for oneself is the best way to learn ethnography. Therefore, in addition to the didactic presentations in the following chapters, this book will feature some do-it-yourself suggestions. Those labeled "For Discussion" are meant to stimulate thinking about the research process and are intended to be shared with some relevant peer group.

Why Do Qualitative Researchers Choose Naturalistic Observation as a Research Tool?

As we will see, good fieldwork is usually a matter of putting together multiple data collection techniques so as to converge on a holistic picture of a setting. Observation is rarely conducted in isolation as the sole method of data collection. In the context, then, of a mixed-methods research project, we can say that observational techniques are particularly well-suited to getting the lay of the land, so to speak. Observations therefore form the basis from which we can develop questions for surveys or interviews. In that sense, they are essential to and inform all other forms of data collection in the field. Using observation to get the lay of the land typically involves the study of:

- specific settings that may be clearly demarcated in physical space (e.g., a shopping mall, a church, a school) or in virtual space (e.g., an on-line chat group)

- events that feature well-defined sequences of activities longer and more complex than single actions, that take place in specific locations, have a defined purpose and meaning, involve more than one person, have a recognized history, and are repeated with some regularity (e.g., a university commencement program)

- demographic factors, which might include, for example, observation of housing or building materials, presence or absence of indoor plumbing, presence and number of intact windows, methods of garbage disposal, and legal or illegal sources of electrical power to indicate socioeconomic differences between neighborhoods as well as observations of where people congregate under particular circumstances.

Site Selection: Examples

The first step in a naturalistic observation inquiry is to select a site in which to conduct fieldwork. In principle, qualitative observation-based research can be conducted wherever people interact in "natural" settings. The method originally came into its own in the context of research in small-scale and relatively homogeneous communities, although it soon came to be used in well-defined enclave communities (defined by race, ethnicity, or social class) within larger societies. More recently, it has been applied to "communities of interest," defined as groups of people who share some common factor, such as members of a support group for cancer survivors, who do not necessarily share all the other aspects of traditional culture beyond the one interest that brought them together. It has even begun to be applied to "virtual communities" formed in cyberspace rather than in traditional physical space. In the latter case, there may be legitimate questions raised about whether all the senses are truly engaged in the process of observation, but an adaptation of the method is almost certainly called for, given the propensity of people nowadays to spend proportionately greater amounts of their time interacting on-line.

Public spaces and opportunity-based site selection.

An observational research site may be one in which the researcher might find him/herself anyway and which is considered "public" in a way that requires no special access; observations in **public space** have taken place in airports, city streets, shopping malls, medical waiting areas, and sporting events. On the other hand, a site may be one which the researcher might need permission to enter: a school classroom, a private event like a wedding or a funeral, or certain places of worship. It is conceivable that a site may not be "chosen" at all, but may present itself to the researcher through happenstance. Some years ago at an unusually long commencement ceremony, I amused myself by making note of facial expressions and body language that seemed to differentiate faculty from students as we progressed (at a glacial pace) through the event. I even wrote a paper about my observations, although the explicit threat of cruel reprisals from my colleagues kept me from ever publishing it.

Site selection for theoretical interests.

More often than not, however, a site is specifically selected for some definite purpose (albeit typically not a formally stated, testable hypothesis). A site might be selected because the researcher has a prior theoretical interest in a particular aspect of sociocultural behavior that is typically found at such a site. One of my research interests, for example, is the way in which ethnic groups in culturally diverse societies define their communal identities, and how those identities shift in response to evolving economic and political circumstances. A study I conducted on Trinidad, an island in the West Indies, dealt specifically with how people from India (brought to the island in colonial times on a system of indenture to work on sugar plantations following the emancipation of the slaves) had made the transition from being an impoverished rural proletariat to being part of the emerging national state. During the course of this research, I conducted on-site observations at both a traditional sugar mill in the countryside and a modern oil refinery near the international port. I was not particularly concerned with the physics and chemistry of the transformation of cane into molasses or of petroleum into gasoline, but rather in the kinds of social interaction that typified the mill, an almost exclusively Indian work site, in comparison to the refinery, where Indians worked in close proximity to people from many different ethnic groups. (See Angrosino, 1974.)

Site selection for policy issues.

A site might also be selected because it typifies an **issue of current policy** concern. My own long-term study of adults with mental "disabilities" derived initially from my skeptical reaction to a spate of alarmist news reports about the "epidemic" of homeless mentally ill people who were "flooding" the streets in the wake of the mass closing of mental institutions. I wanted to get beyond the sensationalized media accounts in order to understand the process of deinstitutionalization from the inside, and so I began observing sheltered workshops, group homes, training centers, and other sites at which deinstitutionalized adults labeled as mentally retarded and/or chronically mentally ill congregated. (See Angrosino, 1998a.)

Site selection for a research commission.

Another way in which a site may become the focus of observational research is through a process of **commissioning, paid or otherwise**. That is, the people or organization involved in that site may want to have research conducted, and will contract with someone for this purpose.

For example, a nearby monastery was getting ready to celebrate the centennial of its founding, and its leaders thought that an article on daily life in the community would make an interesting addition to the series of publications being released to celebrate the event. Since the study of the role of religious institutions in secular society is another of my interests, I have developed contacts with members of various denominations in our area. Through those contacts I was brought to the attention of the abbot of the monastery, who asked me to conduct the research he had in mind. Although much of my study was based on interviews with the monks, I was only able to place their reminiscences in proper context by doing a thorough observation of the site and getting a feel for what living there would be like. (See Angrosino, 2004.) The monastery "commission" was undertaken as an act of community service—assisting a significant local institution in celebrating an important anniversary. I have, however, conducted other research projects for which remuneration was offered; those projects usually involved program evaluation and/or needs assessments of programs offering services to people with disabilities. Most agencies that accept public funding of one sort or another require such studies as part of their official records, in order to demonstrate their public accountability.

Site selection for research linkage.

Sometimes a site is opened up for observation because it is linked with another site in which research is already being conducted. One aspect of my interest in religion in secular society is a comparative study of hospital chaplaincy programs (Angrosino, 2006). An important function of chaplains in many hospitals is ministry in emergency rooms and trauma centers. Since I was already accepted as part of the pastoral care teams at the several hospitals I was studying, I had entrée into their ERs—something that would have been difficult had I approached the hospital administrators on my own, without prior involvement, solely on the basis of my theoretical interest in the issue. In any case, I am now in the midst of a more systematic observation of interaction among the various categories of professionals at work in the ER setting. This sort of site selection is sometimes referred to as "opportunistic" because it comes from a willingness to take advantage of opportunities that arise spontaneously; the word, however, has negative connotations in ordinary discourse, and some scholars prefer to avoid it when discussing research.

Basic Principles of Site Selection

We may summarize the basic principles of site selection as follows:

Select a site so that the issue (be it academic/theoretical or of a current-events nature) can be studied in a reasonably clear fashion.

My interest in the evolution of ethnic identity, as illustrated by migrants from India to the Western Hemisphere, could have been conducted in any number of sites with significant Indian populations. But some of those places, such as Suriname on the north coast of South America, were quite isolated at the time of my initial study, and therefore had Indian populations that had scarcely begun the process of assimilation. There were also communities of West Indian Indians in large urban centers in North America (e.g., New York, Toronto), but they had already completed most of the process. Trinidad seemed to be a good compromise, as its Indian community was neither too traditional nor already too assimilated. Similarly, a study of the effects of deinstitutionalization required a site that had sufficient numbers of adults with mental retardation, that is, a place where such people were likely to seek jobs, housing, and so forth. A rural community with a lone mentally challenged individual would not have been a reasonable site.

Select a site that is comparable to others that have been studied by other researchers, but not one that has itself been over-studied. People in communities with the misfortune of being located near a university campus may well feel that they have been studied to the point of exhaustion; even the best intentioned and most hospitable people reach a point where they feel they have answered the same questions one too many times. (There is an old joke among anthropologists to the effect that the typical Navajo family consists of a mother, a father, three children, and an anthropologist.) On the other hand, it is not necessary to go off to the far corners of the planet in order to find a community that is untouched insofar as research is concerned. Once again, striking an appropriate balance is of the utmost importance. For example, my deinstitutionalization study was inspired by research conducted by colleagues in California; my own observations took me to Florida, Tennessee, Indiana, and the Washington DC area—comparable situations, but with their own distinctive social and political attributes, and ones that had not yet been studied to the same extent as in California. Similarly, I was aware of numerous studies of overseas Indian communities in Africa and the Pacific, as