

# METHODOLOGY

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## **Methodological Challenges in the Ethnographic Study of Multilateral Peacekeeping**

In her original appeal to anthropologists to study institutions of power within our own society—to “study up”—Laura Nader (1969) noted that such a move would encounter a number of difficulties involving problems of access and methodology. Recently, Gusterson (1997:116) has suggested that anthropologists who wish to study up may well have “to abandon, or at least subordinate, the research technique [participant-observation] that has defined anthropology as a discipline.” He proposes as an alternative a kind of multi-site, sometimes virtual research strategy he calls “polymorphous engagement.” Gusterson is right to propose that for many research questions which focus on powerful elites or complex multinational organizations such emergent research strategies are necessary. While it is important to note the discontinuities between emergent research strategies and more traditional anthropological research, it is also instructive to understand and learn from the continuities that exist. For instance, as the scope of anthropological inquiry has enlarged to include for example migrating and diaspora populations anthropologists have adapted participant observation to meet new challenges, including working at multiple sites and with more varied data. Emergent research strategies for “studying up” must meet challenges of access, entry, rapport building, and interpretation common to more traditional participant observation as well.

Understanding how these challenges are met by those “studying up” will require the development of a tradition of practice upon which the discipline can draw as these emergent research strategies mature. My purpose in this paper is to give such a description for one such project. The project is one of a few studies in the developing field of the ethnography of peacekeeping (Featherston and Nordstrom 1994; Ghosh 1994, and; Heiberg 1990; Rubinstein 1989; Rubinstein 1993; Winslow 1997).

In the Summer of 1988 I began investigating cultural aspects of multilateral peacekeeping.<sup>1</sup> As part of this research I have been working with senior diplomats and military officers involved in planning and carrying out peacekeeping missions. I have also studied intensively the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), the oldest established United Nations peacekeeping mission (United Nations Department of Public Information 1996). Both parts of this project involve “studying up” — all of these people are members of the “upper strata” of their own communities and the organizations are institutions of power. Moreover, to various degrees this research requires working with people in multiple, widely dispersed sites.

This project involves a number of methodological challenges that may not occur in some other kinds of anthropological research, although I suspect they are similar to difficulties faced by other anthropologists who have sought to study the international security community (Brasset 1997; Pulliam 1997). In this paper, I focus on the portion of my research devoted to better

understanding the role of culture in the organization and practice of Observer Group Egypt of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization. I discuss the first nine months of my fieldwork and note issues of access and entry to the field, restrictions on the freedom of action I faced in this setting, and problems of role legitimization as these affect the building and maintaining of rapport.

In retrospect this period can be seen as presenting a series of challenges which had to be overcome in order to gain increasingly broad research access. In the discussion, I report several instances which seem to me to mark points where particular challenges were met. The successful negotiation of each of these challenges broadened the access I was permitted. Although these events are described as isolated episodes I emphasize that they are part of a continuing process of daily negotiation, much of which is directed toward defining and legitimating my role as a researcher and member of the community. It is important to understand the context in which these challenges arise, and the following section of this paper provides a brief description of UNTSO and of its Observer Group Egypt (OGE).

### **The United Nations Truce Supervision Organization**

United Nations peacekeeping missions are of two kinds: Observer missions, and Peacekeeping forces (Rikhye 1984). Observer missions deploy unarmed military officers to verify that the terms of a truce agreement are maintained. Observers do this by patrolling designated areas, inspecting troop and weapons concentrations, and, providing independent verification of reported breeches of such agreements. Peacekeeping forces are lightly armed military units which administer an area, usually a buffer zone between belligerents, providing for the separation of forces, security for civilians, and the calm necessary for the pursuit of negotiated settlements.<sup>2</sup>

As peacekeeping has become an internationally accepted technique for managing conflicts and promoting the peaceful settlement of disputes it has received a considerable amount of attention. Most of this attention has focused on how peacekeeping figures into the strategic thinking of nation-states (Houghton and Trinka 1984; Pelcovits 1984; Tabory 1986), or on the pragmatic issues involved in establishing and running peacekeeping missions (International Peace Academy 1984; Nordic Ministers of Defence 1986; Rikhye and Harbottle 1974).

Peacekeeping operations take place in the context of the daily lives of multiple communities -- diplomatic, military, and local (Rubinstein 1989). Each of these communities embodies culturally constituted ways of behaving and understanding the objectives and practices of the operation. Sometimes the intersection of these spheres is problematic. In order to fully appreciate how peacekeeping figures as an instrument of international diplomacy it is important to understand the problems and prospects engendered by the overlapping of the multiple cultural spheres in which it is constituted.

The United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) was the first peacekeeping operation established by the United Nations in the Middle East. Set up in June 1948 by Security Council Resolution to supervise the armistice following the first Arab-Israeli War, its responsibilities and day-to-day tasks have varied considerably over the nearly fifty years of its existence as it has adjusted its operation to the changing environment in the Middle East.<sup>3</sup> In general, however, UNTSO's tasks have consistently involved the use of unarmed military

observers from a number of countries to patrol, inspect, verify, and report conditions in areas where truce agreements have been reached.

The United Nations Military Observers (UNMOs) serving with UNTSO are officers holding at a minimum the rank of captain (they are now mainly majors and lieutenant colonels). The normal tour of duty of at UNTSO is one year, during which the UNMO will ordinarily spend six months in Israel and six months in an Arab country. At the time of my work UNMOs came from seventeen countries and served in five countries in the Middle East (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and Israel) and in Afghanistan and Pakistan. UNMOs are drawn from all service branches -- army, navy, air force and marine. Thus, a posting to UNTSO represents an opportunity for joint service with officers from other countries and services. For Russian (formerly, Soviet) and United States officers, UNTSO is one of the few assignments where they can work together for extended periods of time.

UNTSO is different from other United Nations peacekeeping operations in two important respects. First, UN peacekeeping operations are authorized by the Security Council, at which time a mandate for the operation's activities is set out and the operation is authorized for a limited period, usually six months. Most peacekeeping operations, therefore, must have their mandate renewed periodically by the Security Council. This is not the case for UNTSO. When UNTSO was established it was mandated to monitor compliance with cease fire agreements and to remain at this task until peace was achieved (Vadset 1988:5).

Second, ordinarily, peacekeeping operations work within a single country or between the forces of two countries. In contrast, UNTSO's activities normally spread over five countries, and sometimes extend beyond these as well.

Because of these two unique characteristics UNTSO has become the focal point of United Nations peacekeeping activities. In this capacity it has come to be a reservoir from which officers with experience and expertise in peacekeeping can be drawn for the planning and staffing of new operations. For instance, it was the UNTSO staff who undertook the technical missions and formed the first contingents deployed in the new peacekeeping operations in Iraq/Iran and Namibia.

### **Observer Group Egypt**

Following the October War of 1973, the United Nations established a peacekeeping force to supervise the cease-fire between Egypt and Israel, to supervise the redeployment of their forces, and to control the buffer zones between them. This force, the United Nations Emergency Force II (UNEF II), existed from October 1973 until July 1979. During this time UNTSO formed Observer Group Sinai, which was put under the operational control of UNEF II.

In March of 1979 Egypt and Israel concluded a peace treaty. Initially that treaty envisioned supervision by a United Nations peacekeeping force which would supersede UNEF II, or significantly change its mandate. The treaty and the formation of a new United Nations force was disapproved of by the Soviet Union and the Arab States (Urquhart 1987:300-301). The resulting treaty therefore provided for the establishment of a Multinational Force and Observers in the Sinai which was *not* under United Nations control (Tabory 1986:147-156). At this time UNTSO's presence in the Sinai was maintained by the establishment of Observer Group Egypt.

During the time of my study, Observer Group Egypt was headquartered in Cairo, together with the United Nations Liaison Office in Cairo, and maintained observation posts (OPs) throughout the Sinai peninsula. There were 54 UNMOs serving at OGE. The Soviet, United States and French contingents at OGE each consisted of 15 UNMOs. The remaining 9 UNMOs came from fourteen other countries. In addition to the military observers who served with OGE, there were a number of United Nations Field Service Officers serving in support capacities. It is not my purpose in this paper to report the results of my research at OGE. This abbreviated discussion of its organization and function is intended only to provide background for the following discussion of research challenges

The UNMOs at OGE recognized four major "national" divisions among themselves: American, French, Soviet, and the "rest of the world." Posting at UNTSO was considered an accompanied tour by all national services, except those of the United States, and many UNMOs at OGE had their families with them. Because the average tour at OGE is six-months, hardly a week passed without one or more person joining or leaving the station.

For at least some portion of their service with OGE each UNMO participates in the main operational task of the observation group: maintaining a presence in the area by staffing the six observations posts in the Sinai and carrying out routine patrols of the area. The management of time at the observer group revolved around these tasks. Each of the OPs is occupied by a team of two UNMOs, of different nationalities, for a week at a time.

A small number of other UNMOs were posted to the Cairo headquarters in staff positions which occupied them with the tasks of running the organization. These officers worked at the OGE headquarters which was located in an old home in a Cairo neighborhood near the international airport. The building, was routinely referred to as "The Villa."

### **Research Access and Entry**

It is something of an anthropological truism that the way one enters the field has an important effect on the entire course of his/her research. Often the manner in which initial contacts are made, and under whose auspices the researcher acts, determines the roles into which a fieldworker is eventually placed by the people with whom he or she works. Our literature is full of descriptions of how a fieldworker's introduction to her research site affected the future course of her work. The people with whom a researcher works must understand in their own terms who the researcher is and what he or she is doing. The manner in which a researcher enters the field therefore provides information which is used to place the researcher into an appropriate set of culturally constituted roles (Cohen, et al. 1970).

I believe that this observation applies equally to all forms of social research which involve face-to-face interactions between the researcher and other people. Thus researchers developing "emergent research methods" needed to "study up" ought to be as cognizant of these factors as those undertaking traditional ethnographic study. Studying people in professional communities and institutions of power, however, may lead the researcher to face special constraints based upon higher degrees of gatekeeping in such settings. For instance, because in the study of peacekeeping the researcher seeks to enter a professional community with a strictly defined and restricted set of roles, there are very few roles which the researcher can achieve. Moreover, once having achieved these roles the anthropological researcher is likely to find that the activities

of an incumbent in them are restricted in ways that are inconsistent with traditional anthropological participant observation.

Because of these considerations, I took considerable care in approaching OGE. The summer before I went to Egypt I met the Chief of Staff (COS) of UNTSO at a conference on peacekeeping. I explained to him my general research interests in cultural aspects of peacekeeping, and explored the possibility of studying OGE. He seemed a bit puzzled that an anthropologist should be taking on such a project, but nonetheless expressed a willingness to help in any reasonable way he could. Without this modest support, or the support of some other member of the UN secretariat, I believe that my research could not have proceeded.

During the next three months the COS and I had a cursory correspondence, in the course of which I asked formally for permission to conduct research at OGE. Early one morning after I had moved to Cairo, I received a telephone call from him. He told me that after a visit of two weeks duration he was about to leave Cairo. He added that he had discussed my request with the Chief of OGE. Although the COS regretted that he could not see me himself, he instructed me to arrange to see the Chief of OGE. This proved to be difficult as the Chief's schedule was quite full. Eventually persistence was rewarded and about three weeks later we succeeded in arranging a time to meet.

Reviewing my notes of that meeting I am struck with how fortunate I was to have been introduced to OGE by the Chief of Staff rather than to have approached them directly myself. This introduction both got me over the first hurdle that I would have to negotiate in order to do this research and brought me to the base of the next.

Diplomats and military officers are used to scholars bothering them with questions. Therefore there is a role to which an anthropologist seeking to do research among them can be assimilated. Unfortunately, at least from the anthropologist's perspective, most of the researchers they have had contact with have worked in traditions-such as survey research or international affairs analyses-which involve brief contacts between the researcher and the officers. Some of these researchers come from the staffs of politicians and are viewed with suspicion as they have produced politically-motivated reports that are unremittingly critical of the military and give, in the view of some, unfair portraits of the military. It was against such a backdrop that I approached OGE.

My reception at OGE was cordial but reserved. I was given a briefing by the Chief on the operation and responsibilities of the observer group. This included an elaborate and unappealing portrait of the rigors of OP life. I explained my research interests and asked permission to conduct research among the observers and to spend a portion of my research in participant observation by accompanying UNMOs on their trips to the OP and on their patrols.

The Chief had listened without comment to my description of my interests, until I mentioned that I would like to conduct participant observation. At this point he said that he thought it would be important, if I were to pursue this approach, to spend one or two nights at OPs in the desert. It seemed to me at the time that this was intended as something of a challenge to test my sincerity. I also think that my response that the opportunity to spend as much time as possible with UNMOs at OPs and on patrol in the Sinai was what I most sought both surprised and

intrigued him. We parted with his promise to explore whether this would be possible, and to get back to me.

In this meeting I believed I had passed one set of gatekeeping controls and confronted. I had demonstrated my earnest interest and sympathetic outlook, but by stepping outside of the role of a visiting researcher who would pay a brief visit and then move on, I had created a new problem in understanding me for my potential hosts. UNTSO in general, and OGE in particular, operates under a considerable amount of international attention. Its activities are also restricted by international agreements, national security concerns of its host countries, and the vagaries of diplomatic relations which effect its status. The prospect of having a researcher hanging around for a relatively long time must have been unsettling. I therefore was encouraged when, several weeks after our initial meeting, I was asked to return to The Villa for further discussions with the Chief of OGE.

That meeting took place on a Friday morning and was exceedingly brief. The Chief informed me that he had consulted with the Chief of Staff of UNTSO and that I was welcome to conduct my research on an informal basis. They regretted that because of diplomatic restrictions on its activities, and for security reasons, I could not travel in United Nations' vehicles with UNMOs to the OPs or on patrol. Of course, I would be welcome to visit the OPs on my own, if UNMOs invited me to do so. (Indeed, as noted below, this restriction was in practice largely removed.)

The Chief then called in his Senior Liaison Officer, who he introduced to me as someone who was particularly interested in my project. Before taking his leave of us the Chief suggested that I return to The Villa that evening when the weekly "happy hour" would take place. He added that I was welcome to bring my wife, as it is a family event. He then left me with the Senior Liaison Officer who explained to me the mission and organization of OGE and patiently decoded the many acronyms used at the observer group.

I returned by myself that evening. I was met by the Senior Liaison Officer who took great care to introduce me to his colleagues. About two hours into the evening the Chief called for everyone's attention. At this time he welcomed two new UNMOs to the station and wished one departing UNMO farewell. Immediately after making this "hails and farewells" he introduced me to the assembled group as an anthropologist who would be studying OGE, that they should expect to see me around The Villa, and he asked me to make a few remarks about my interests. There was considerable surprise about my interests and lots of jokes about the primitive culture of military observers and that I was there to see if they were no longer Neanderthals.

Following that evening's introduction my presence at The Villa was legitimated. But, it remained for me to negotiate my role with UNMOs of different nationalities each of whom understood my work and interests in different ways. Since differences in perceptions about the role of conversations with me could be problematic, this heterogeneity of role definition is in itself a challenge (Briggs 1986). It also began a period of about six weeks (though it seemed much longer), which was at once critical to my project yet exceedingly frustrating.

During this time I was able to establish a basic rapport with the UNMOs at OGE on which deeper relations could develop. It was frustrating because the building of this rapport and the negotiation of my role as a researcher had to be carried out in the context of a restricted range of action.

Some time ago Goffman (1959) convincingly showed that people “perform” differently in public than in private settings. In traditional anthropological work in a community there are a variety of public spaces in which the researcher can observe and participate, even when he or she has not yet been permitted access to private spaces. Through work in multiple public settings an anthropologist can begin to discern systematic patterns by triangulating observations and experiences. One of the challenges faced by a researcher working in an institutional setting, like a peacekeeping operation, is that the vast majority of space is private and restricted because of security or other concerns.

Upon entering the OGE Villa, one steps into a round entrance hallway. To one’s right is a set of stairs leading to the second floor, which is completely occupied by offices. In front of the entrance are two rooms, in one of which is the Duty Officer and in the other communications equipment. To the left is a doorway that leads to a room of about 15 by 20 feet containing a bar and several tables. This is the only public space at The Villa.

Because it is a unique and a small space one’s presence in it is conspicuous. Yet, until one is invited to other, private, areas it is the only place to which the researcher has free access. In fact, even this access is controlled since cash is not accepted in payment at the Bar. Instead drinks are paid for with chits, purchased with United States dollars, and sold only to OGE staff or Associate Members of The Villa.

For the first six weeks of my fieldwork I spent 4 or 5 hours four days each week in the Bar. I was not an Associate Member of the Villa and therefore I had no bar chits. During these times UNMOs would come into the Bar and talk to me for a few minutes. Having no bar chits meant I could not invite these people by offering them coffee or a drink. Moreover, nearly all were guarded in their speech and demeanor. Some, particularly the United States and Soviet UNMOs, were either suspicious of my intentions or construed my project (“writing a book about us”) as a prelude to the publication of a best seller that would bring enormous monetary return, especially when I sold the movie rights.

During this six week period a kind of rapport began to develop between me and the UNMOs. First, they got used to seeing me at The Villa. Second, in the Bar and at the Friday happy hours we began to discover areas of common interest that did not bear on their operational responsibilities. Thus an interest in computers brought me into extended interaction with an Italian and a French UNMO. And an interest in guitar playing brought extended interaction with a Soviet and a United States UNMO.

As the six week period drew to a close two things happened which solidified and deepened my rapport with the UNMOs. First, because of my interest and knowledge about computers I was invited into one of the private offices for coffee and a discussion of communications programming. Second, I attended my first “Big” happy hour, and I was accompanied for the first time by my wife. The happy hours at OGE are arranged by the Recreation and Welfare Committee and have a standard ritual form (Rubinstein 1993:552-557). Each month one of the national contingents is responsible for arranging four Friday night happy hours. Two are known as “Small happy hours,” one is a family Barbecue, and one is a “Big happy hour” with some kind of special event or entertainment.

This particular happy hour had a theme which required that people come dressed in a local outfit. The observers and their families had been in the Middle East for sometime and there were many rich and culturally sensitive costumes. As part of the evenings entertainment the Recreation and Welfare Committee had hired a belly dancer. The belly dancer was late in arriving, and when she finally did perform she spent much of her time venturing into the audience and bringing various men and women to the stage to dance with her. One was my wife. What we knew, but the belly dancer did not, was that Sandy had studied belly dancing for three years in the United States and in Egypt. For months afterwards we heard compliments about her dancing that evening.

These two events seemed to mark passing through another set of gatekeeping controls and the consolidation of a legitimate role at OGE. After a long six weeks it began to seem that many of the UNMOs had decided that we were probably good people, despite our being anthropologists.

### **Deepening and Maintaining Rapport**

There was no magical establishment of a lasting rapport with the UNMOs at OGE. Rather these two events marked the beginning of yet another phase, of several months, during which I now had the opportunity to consolidate my anthropological role and to deepen the rapport that had begun to form between the UNMOs, their families, and us.

The deepening of rapport and the construction of legitimate and mutually comfortable roles was expressed in many ways, large and small. There is no point in describing in detail here how each of these came about. But it is perhaps useful to note some of the events that led to them and to stress that they grew out of a real exchange on a day-to-day level between us and the people at The Villa.

Some of events which contributed to these developments were mundane, some highly charged. Events of note include:

- We were invited to become associate members of The Villa, thus establishing for me a role in the community that was legitimate and could be assimilated to the culture of the observer group. (And, importantly enabled me to purchase the bar chits that would allow me to reciprocate social interactions with UNMOs.)
- Several of the UNMOs read my professional papers on anthropology and international security and (though they didn't always like what they read) this established me as a *bona fide* scholar.
- We exchanged family dinners and favors; I began to be invited to OPs by UNMOs, and during one such trip was stuck in the desert sand for three hours.
- We conceived a child, and after five hopeful months lost him to an infection acquired in Egypt, which brought great interest and an outpouring of compassion -- especially among the Soviet and American contingents, which had previously been the most difficult to reach.
- A Marine Lieutenant Colonel and I spent several hours at an Egyptian war museum talking about the social construction of Victory and about the symbolism and meaning of the placement of Egyptian and captured Israeli ordnance on display there.



After some months it became apparent that introducing a tape recorder and questionnaire to supplement my activities at The Villa would at last not breach the developing rapport. In May 1989, four and a half months after I was first granted permission to do research at OGE I was able to begin making formal, semi-structured, recorded interviews with UNMOs.

At the conclusion of one of those interviews with a United States lieutenant colonel, I discovered that the batteries in my field recorder had run out during our conversation. Although I had notes, I expressed my disappointment, whereupon the colonel placed on the table between us a small Dictaphone and urged me not to worry since I could copy his tape. Which I did. This incident underscored both a level of discomfort with my work and a level of acceptance of it, which I find interesting.

### **Conclusion**

Gusterson (1997:115) rightly points out that in many situations of “studying up” access is more tightly controlled than it might be in traditional ethnographic endeavors. Formal permission to study institutions of power may be withheld or take an unacceptably long time to be granted. If such permission is not granted the situation may create ethical or practical problems for the researcher. But whether researchers “studying up” encounter these problems to a greater degree than do those seeking to conduct more traditional participant observation is really an empirical question. To anthropologists who have sought research permission for ethnographic work in Egypt, for instance, such frustrations will seem familiar whether they intended to “study up” or not.

The history of anthropological fieldwork privileging participant observation is a rich and varied one, wherein researchers have shown considerable creativity in how and from where they gather ethnographic information (Briggs 1986; Rubinstein 1991; Wolcott 1995). In terms of the challenges faced by those seeking to undertake participant observation, there may well be more variation among the experiences of those “studying up” as there is between them and those conducting participant observation in other settings. It is well worth reporting these challenges and sharing with one another our strategies for successfully meeting them. As Gusterson (1997:116) describes it, the strategy of “polymorphous engagement” seems to me just such a description, and the strategy seems to be more continuous with earlier ethnographic research than it appears to be a discretely new method.

Whether “studying up” requires a new method remains for me an open question. In my study of the cultural aspects of multilateral peacekeeping, I found the initial stages of this fieldwork -- of gaining access and building rapport -- to be among the most attenuated and difficult I had experienced in a dozen years of anthropological fieldwork. But, persistent and open engagement with the peacekeepers at UNTSO and elsewhere has led to a good working relationship. More importantly, like work in more traditional research contexts fieldwork in this setting has proven to be an exchange which I have found deeply affecting.

### Notes

1. Preparation of this paper was made possible by a grant from the United States Institute of Peace. The research upon which this paper is based was supported in part by grants from the Ploughshares Fund and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. The research was approved by the Northwestern University Institutional Review Board. An early version of this paper was presented at the 1989 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, in the session "Studying the Defense Community: Access, Method, Ethics." For comments on earlier drafts of this paper I thank Sandra D. Lane, Mary LeCron Foster and John Burdick.
2. This is the traditional distinction made for "first generation" peacekeeping and was in use at the time I began my work. Although not explicitly provided for, these kinds of missions said to be authorized under Chapter VI of the United Nations' Charter "Pacific Settlement of Disputes." (And, these are sometimes referred to as Six-and-a-half Operations.) More recently, especially since 1991, the United Nations has engaged in a number of more forceful military operations intended to eliminate a threat to world peace. These are operations authorized under Chapter VII of the Charter, "Action with Respect to Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace, and Acts of Aggression." Although Chapter VII operations often have the character of an expeditionary force, they are still often confusingly labeled as "peacekeeping" rather than other perhaps more appropriate terms, such as "peace enforcement."
3. For detailed histories of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization see (Rikhye 1984:passim.; Rikhye and Harbottle 1974:124-130; United Nations Department of Public Information 1996:15-32). One of the interesting aspects of the study of peacekeeping operations is that their role and purpose is differently understood at various points in an operation's life and by different communities (Rubinstein 1989:52-54).

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