

## **Further notes on subjectivity and bias, INFO 272, Fall 2009**

Jenna Burrell, PhD  
Assistant Professor  
School of Information

All research involves disruptions – the ideal of ‘fly on the wall’ unobtrusively observing is rarely realistic. You disrupt by asking someone a question – to verbalize something that they would not talk about of their own volition. Survey work, laboratory experiments, as well as fieldwork all are afflicted by this condition.

My argument is that the paranoia about fieldwork, the idea that your presence in the field is regrettable, that you can’t trust what you observe or hear from people is a misunderstanding of what fieldwork is or should be about. Your presence is something to account for, but not something that ought to be wholly avoided. Removing yourself from the field introduces other problems of accuracy of your research. It cuts off your ability to work iteratively for one thing. It introduces another level of mediation (through whomever you send in your place). Furthermore, some degree of disruption is necessary to open up and examine whatever it is that you are studying. **Rarely can observation alone allow you to really understand what is going on – you must also ask questions.**

### **Subjectivity in social analysis:**

**...means submitting yourself to the same set of circumstances you are studying** and then observing your own response. i.e. how open source programmers work – how they come to understand their tools, unspoken knowledge that may best be gained by participating (not just observing). **But** you must be careful not to treat this personal perspective as though it were necessarily equivalent to how others experience these same circumstances – it is only one layer of data that may be usefully related to other forms of data.

**...means leveraging the way you disrupt what you are studying** to understand more about the social phenomena you are studying. i.e. the book Never in Anger

### **Some thoughts on bias:**

Bias is an ongoing dilemma, a constant battle. I do not intend for you to conclude that bias is a meaningless notion to research, but rather that we should always be alert to the way we are situated, disruptive – but not because this is a pollutant that we can always erase or avoid.

Bias can be understood in two main ways. One, as the disruption you create in the setting you are trying to study. Two, as the reading you have of a social situation that is filtered through your own

perceptions, history, skills, etc. Neither should be understood purely through this idea of bias-as-pollutant, but offer strengths and weaknesses to your research.

### Accounting for 'bias':

- 1) **Let go of the assumption that you can or should be able to claim a purely objective and detached perspective in your research.** Your research will always be conducted from a situated stance and you can't entirely escape yourself as researcher (which also features into your selection of topics, questions, interpretations, etc). That being said you can certainly get beyond a purely subjective reading of a situation in part through this *emic* approach that attends to the meanings/concepts/interpretations of others rather than your own. All of the techniques we are learning and practicing in this course are about getting beyond your own routine interpretations and reactions to the world around you.
- 2) Take note of what the people you are studying seem to understand about who you are and what you are there to do. Correct them whenever possible. Be clear by explaining your research in an accessible way.
- 3) Consider using a combination of your own direct observation and data gathering with similar work carried out by an assistant who occupies a different social position. If you are a man work with a woman, if you are a foreigner work with a local, etc. Recognize when who you are is a barrier to what you want to find out and consider workarounds (i.e. in the challenge I faced trying to talk to Internet scammers in Ghana when there was some speculation that I worked for the CIA)
- 4) Get multiple perspectives on the topic that can be compared - observation related to interviews, or a series of interviews with the same person on the same topic but over time, or an interview with multiple people about the same event, etc.
- 5) Remember that qualitative interpretive research generates forms of knowledge that are not simply about verification. Your ultimate goal is usually not to prove that people are telling you the truth, but about examining the way they are telling you what they are telling you.