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On Responsibility in Ethnography
(Comment on Kotarba, *QS* September, 1979)

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Ethnographers have a serious responsibility to the people they study, the audience they address, and their colleagues to be both discrete and insightful about the human condition. Accordingly I read Kotarba's article with deep regret and professional distress. It is theoretically confused, methodologically unsound, and ethically questionable. Justification of these assertions is presented in the following pages.

INTERPRETIVE CONFUSION

The major concept of the article, "intimacy," remains undefined. Nonetheless, since intimacy is "accomplished," the author obviously assumes that it is something that can be observed and determined as present or absent. The categorization of inmates' visitors provides some clue to the possible meanings of the central concept:

> The intimate visitors are most often wives, fiancees, or girlfriends (sic) of the prisoners (p. 89).
>
> The concerned visitors, who represent approximately 15% of all visitors, include family members such as parents and siblings (p. 95).
>
> The third category of visitors, who represent approximately 15% of all visitors, includes friends, co-workers, and others who visit prisoners in order to cheer them up and improve their morale (p. 97).

It appears that intimacy is defined by sexual relationships—an unacceptable definition of the word. Obviously, parents, offspring, friends, and even strangers can be "intimates": "it is not relationships which are most usefully and accurately placed on a continuum from stranger to acquaintance to intimate. Rather, it is the interaction of encounter-as-experienced (Lester, 1979, pp. 4-5)." Regardless of the acceptability to Kotarba of others' definitions of intimacy, his omission of a review and critique of the extensive literature on intimacy is difficult to justify. (For example, Skolnick and Skolnick, 1974; Levinger and Rausch, 1979; Mazur, 1973.)

Intimacy, for Kotarba, is associated primarily with a heterosexual couple. A wife, for example, becomes less of an intimate (or the encounter less intimate) if she has her offspring accompany her on a visit. Kotarba states: "When the mother has her children with her, the interaction is much less intimate and is made public" (p. 95). Are parent-child interactions non-intimate by definition? How is it possible for a public event, seeing a person

separated by plexiglass in a large public area dominated by an armed guard, to become more public and less intimate by the inclusion of a child? Perhaps it is less *overtly* sexual, but not necessrily less intimate.

In yet another passage, Kotarba notes that concerned visitors are "familial and not intimate" (p. 96), suggesting some agenda exists for determining intimacy as distinct from family. One of the "casual visitors," for instance, definitely seems concerned, if not "intimate," by looking after his incarcerated friend's affairs and protecting him from the knowledge of infidelity by his "old lady" (p. 99). In the article, each of the categories of visitors is somewhat arbitrarily assigned to intimacy classifications, but this situation is made even more mystifying by the following statement: "It is clear that this model can be applied to the recruiter/applicant encounter in the job recuritment area at professional meetings (where the intimacy sought is of a professional nature)" (p. 101). Since I have participated in many job interviews and would categorize none of them as intimate professional encounters (although some were pleasant), the reference to "professional intimacy" is baffling and needs to be explicitly defined. Even more confusing, after defining encounters with more than one participant as essentially non-intimate, Kotarba states in the conclusion that multiple-party conversations are used to achieve the desired level of intimacy. Finally, with an undefined concept of intimacy, the following tautological statement is made and italicized: "*The more intimate the topic of conversation, the more the participants will seek intimacy within the setting*" (p. 100). Since intimacy was severely delimited by the setting and the situation, participants clearly controlled the extent of their intimacy. As Kotarba himself recorded, one wife explained this control in the following manner:

> Well, usually when we talk about it (sex) it's, uh, usually in a way of what's going to happen when he comes home. Otherwise, if we, uh, if we were going to talk about it in just about any other way, it would be a hurting experience. (p. 93)

In another area of inconsistency, contradictory statements are made on the ease of entree to the jail visiting area. For example, on page 84 Kotarba writes: "For the novice or first-time visitor, the process of entree is often frustrating," and quotes one participant as saying that the staff "treat you like you're the one who's incarcerated" (pp. 84-85). Yet, in the conclusion, Kotarba completely negates this earlier evidence by writing: "Entree is commonly non-problematic since it is structured by the open, official rules to the organization. . ." (p. 99), and again, "entree is a simple process that requires little more than being there at the right time and day of the week with sufficient patience to cope with the tedious bureaucracy" (pp. 99-100). Clearly, the bureaucracy is much more than tedious since, as Kotarba notes, one Spanish-speaking man was literally "escorted out by two guards" (p. 87), who, I presume, were armed. The visitor was unable to see his incarcerated nephew because he "could not understand English or the rule of entree" (p. 87).

In a crude simplification, the author notes that for many children of lower-class background, paternal imprisonment "has little shock effect and no negative effect on the love-relationship between father and child" (p. 87). Such a strong statement cannot be made on the basis of such little evidence collected over a period of only ten weeks (see methodology critique below). Participants repeatedly stated that shame was associated

with the jail experience, indicating that sons, too, would be affected. As a matter of fact, Kotarba himself characterizes many concerned visitors (i.e. family) as particularly conscious of the dishonor "put on the 'family name' by the incarceration" (p. 96).

Conversations in the waiting room are characterized by *mutual openness* p. 85). However, it would be logical to assume, again following the evidence and arguments given in the article, that the conversations are structured by concerns for secrecy, the aura of shame, and absorption with the anticipated emotion-laden experience. Mutual openness, rather than being characteristic of the setting, would be unusual and unexpected.

To summarize briefly other problematic interpretative points: Kotarba writes that visitors in the visiting area follow rules of *common courtesy* (p. 100), ignoring the fact that courtesy displays are structurally demanded by the presence of guards and the threat of losing visiting rights. Garfinkel' (1967) is incorrectly portrayed as concerned only with cognitive reality and language and not with embodied selves (p. 101); the author's emphasis on the interactive context is on positive emotions, omitting anger, depression, and betrayal which are significant components of the inmates and their visitors' lived experience. (See the suggestion of this possibility in footnote 2, p. 102). In the interest of discussing other equally important issues, these problematic areas are probed only cursorily.

METHODOLOGICAL WEAKNESS

Kotarba has undertaken an analysis of intimacy in a beleagured setting by observing no more than 20 visiting days. This figure, although not explicitly provided in the text, is derived from his statements that the data were gathered over a ten-week period of participant observation and interviewing (p. 82) and that visiting days occurred only on Saturdays and Sundays (footnote 4, p. 102). Towards the end of the research period, he conducted "formal interviews with fifteen visitors, three prisoners, and three members of the jail administration" (p. 83). This information brings up several major issues: Can as few as three prisoners represent and reflect the process of intimacy from the perspective of all the incarcerated? Can jail administrators be seen as participants or considered reliable observers of intimacy on jail visits? And can the close associates of inmates be trusted to express their opinions freely to a relative stranger who is affiliated with a coercive institution?

Nowhere does the author state how he achieved entree into the setting, or explain his relationship with the jail bureaucracy. This is crucial information since it would seem to be impossible for a participant observer to spend up to 20 days in a jail's visiting area without coming to the attention of the jail authorities. Moreover, since he interviewed three members of the administration, Kotarba clearly had some form of institutional sponsorship. This legitimation must have affected his research findings and relationship with the population studied (Habermas, 1970, 1973) and should be openly discussed and documented. Claims of impartiality of the research must sound hollow indeed to a population justifiably suspicious of being "bugged," and subjected to close scrutiny by authorities. Thus, the people being observed and interviewed are not entirely voluntary in their participation. This lack of free choice or acceptance of Kotarba is documented by himself:

> I realized the intense protection of group rights to privacy, as enforced by the concerned visitors, when I was continuously given "dirty looks" by them as I observed their demeanor. (Footnote 9, p. 102)

As one respondent states: "It's really hard to uh, come, come right out and tell you all about it, really, but it (sexual conversations and expectations) is a good feeling" (p. 93). Kotarba attributes such reticence to the lack of consciousness and awareness of sexual feelings by the participants and not to a lack of rapport with or trust in him as a researcher. For example, he interprets the participants' resistance to him in the following pseudo-Freudian way:

> I conducted intensive interviews with a tape recorder running, freeing me to take account of what I perceived to be key words or phrases that might relate to the most secretive or subconscious levels of the respondents' thought. As the research developed, it became increasingly clear that much of the deep meaning associated with the visiting process related to sexual fantasies and other affective elements, some of which the respondents couldn't offer because they were either not aware of them, or couldn't adequately put them into words. (Footnote 1, pp. 101-102)

Psychoanalysts receive years of careful training, including self-analysis. Yet, Kotarba blithely assumes that he, a stranger with a short taped interview on an intimate topic, possibly associated with a coercive authority, can interpret and understand intimate sexual fantasies and desires. Not only is this theoretically unsupportable, it is methodologically unsound, and ethically questionable.

There is, moreover, an element of forcible probing on sensitive topics alluded to in several places. One example is found in the following passage:

> Of course, it was extremely difficult and, practically speaking, impossible to question wives and girlfriends (sic) about incidents of "cheating." Almost to a one, the women pledged fidelity to their spouses and boyfriends (sic), perhaps fearing that such information would get back to their male friends. (Footnote 7, p. 102)

Carelessly, Kotarba asserts that relationships destroyed by incarceration, regrettably referred to as "lost wives and girlfriends (sic)," "may comprise an unresearchable population" (Footnote 5, p. 102). Although such a population would not be uncovered with the superficial contacts made available by a jail administration's sponsorship, it should be possible to interview such a group and examine the strains and pain associated with prison relationships. Obviously, female inmates face the same difficulties and could similarly be studied.

Kotarba's claim that, "I was easily able to observe the physical demeanor of the visitors and prisoners during their face-to-face interaction" (pp. 88-98) is doubtful. Since the prisoners are seated on the opposite side of the visitors' section, where the observer was presumably located, and the seats are situated in a row, with plexiglass enclosures at the front and side of each cubicle, visibility is somewhat limited. For example, the prisoners' sexual excitement, in response to the visitors, described in great detail by the author, would be partially concealed by the physical setting.

Intrusion of the researcher is implicit in "the insistence of many middle-class mothers that I not speak to their children about their father"

(p. 87). One wonders whether lower-class mothers were too intimidated by, rather than too indifferent to, to protest against questions about and directed toward their children. This latter issue brings us to some of the more directly problematic issues of whether this research should have been conducted in this manner at all.

ETHICAL QUESTIONS

As the author notes, "Various citizens' advisory commissions and government agencies have determined that every prisoner has the right to communicate in person with individuals of his own choosing" (Brodsky, 1975: 47, quoted by Kotarba, p. 81). Prisoners' associates have this right also and questions about intimacy, asked by a social scientist with the tacit, if not explicit sponsorship of prison authorities, may be ethically coercive.

The population clearly did not want to be overheard: "They will make sure that no one is either standing too close, listening, in, or making disruptive noises" (p. 90). As noted above, Kotarba received many "dirty looks" while conducting his research. Yet these obvious indicators of displeasure and invasion of privacy were ignored. Although disguised participant observation can sometimes be justified (Humphreys, 1970:167-173; Roth, 1962:283-84), in this instance it is difficult to do so.

There is a definite attempt by Kotarba to get information that is not freely given. At one point he writes that he disliked the accounts gathered with "traditional, directed interview techniques," for these presentations appeared to him to be "much too rational and constrained when compared to the intimate body language often observed during the visits" (p. 89). Kotarba appears to have collected some of his data by pushing beyond the limits deemed desirable by the population and was stopped from being even more intrusive by the group's effective defensive measures:

> The meanings present during interaction (i.e., the content of the conversations and the private thoughts of the participants) could not, however, be effectively discerned during interaction, partly because I could not record or "eavesdrop" on the actual conversation. (p. 89)

Sociologists are not snoops, voyeurs, or verbally coercive. Such behavior is unprofessional. Although the author may have received permission from the interviewee to record in writing a passage preceeded by the statement "Phew, you don't know how glad I am that thing is finally off," if such permission was granted it should have been explicitly stated in the article. Even then, however, such a statement and the ensuing comments, intended to be unrecorded, should be used only in the most limited and circumscribed contexts.

Kotarba provides explicit details of women's sexual arousal (p. 94) which were not, in my opinion, intended for observation. These women are forced to undergo great emotional, sexual, and probably financial, deprivation; and their suffering should be treated with respect and dignity. Their one chance for more expression than officially permitted is displaying printed material or private photographs to inmates. It seems evident that the visitors' flurry of hidden papers and attempts to engage in uninterrupted interaction must be obvious to the guards, although they remain overtly "unaware;" yet the publication of this minor infraction of inhumane rules

could potentially result in the loss of this small act of defiance and comfort (p. 90). Possible harm or negative reactions toward a population generous enough to aid researchers, has to be stringently avoided.

One of the questions that must be determined when considering research on ethical dilemmas is whether there is an actual need to study a particular problem or setting for its undeniable uniqueness and its significance for interpreting and understanding the world. The study under discussion alas could have been conducted in a variety of settings, as the author himself suggests; at high school "mixers" or during hospital visits. (The latter area, too, might be ethically problematical but less so than the prison setting; pp. 100-101.) Thus, we see that this population need not have been harrassed, or observed in intimate acts severely constrained by the intrusion of coercive authorities, and then assessed by a stranger and harshly judged as "unaware" of their deep feelings. Combining these ethical dilemmas with the interpretive muddle evident throughout the paper, it is hard to believe that this work would have been read approvingly by three respected sociologists and reviewed favorably by at least three other "qualified" sociologists associated with *Qualitative Sociology.*

Qualitative sociology is often criticized, particularly by quantitative researchers, as being "easy" to do, without stringent methodological procedures, based on little data, characterized by armchair philosophy, and irresponsibility in its ethical obligations toward the people studied. Unfortunately, in this instance, such criticisms are justifiable.

NOTES

[1]Garfinkel's brilliant study of Agnes, a transsexual who adapts to living in a physically and socially changed self, is but one example of the inaccuracy of depicting his writings as only "cognitive."

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