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## Observing the Observer: Understanding Our Selves in Field Research

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## Observing the Observer: Understanding Our Selves in Field Research

### Abstract

In *Observing the Observer*, Shulamit Reinharz (2011) provides students and the novice researcher with an insightful and descriptive framework in which to understand the theoretical underpinning of ethnographical studies. The author presents an outline for comprehending unidentified and identified characteristics of the researcher in the fieldwork setting, making the self an essential tool of fieldwork.

### Keywords

Participant Observation, Field Research, Field Notes, Fieldwork, Observer

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## **Understanding Self: An Essential Tool of Field Research**

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*In Observing the Observer, Shulamit Reinharz (2011) provides students and the novice researcher with an insightful and descriptive framework in which to understand the theoretical underpinning of ethnographical studies. The author presents an outline for comprehending unidentified and identified characteristics of the researcher in the fieldwork setting, making the self an essential tool of fieldwork. Key Words: Participant Observation, Field Research, Field Notes, Fieldwork, and Observer.*

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*Observing the Observer* by Shulamit Reinharz (2011) provides a valuable tool for those embarking on an ethnographical study. Central to the author's presentation is the analysis of the characteristics of the researcher. The author highlights the importance of exposing how these characteristics contribute to the experience of both the fieldworker and the phenomenon under study. In her discussion regarding the utility of field notes and how "a careful analysis of [these tools] could illuminate aspects of the self or 'selves' in community's culture" she highlights the importance of self reflection as an integral form of the research process (p. 5). Reinharz describes "a tripartite division among selves in the field, which [she] labels as research selves [selves that are concerned with doing the research], personal selves [selves that one brings to the field], and situational selves [selves that are created]" (p. 5). *Observing the Observer* is structured in a manner which guides readers easily through a discussion focused on each of these variations of researchers' selves.

Chapters one through three focus on creating an identity as a researcher in the eyes of those being observed, as well as offering insights into the difficulty that this process of distinguishing oneself may create. Of particular interest, chapters one and two provide insights into the method Reinharz (2011) utilized to develop herself as a researcher. Readers will benefit from her in-depth discussion incorporating excerpts from her original field notes that outline her experience working with her sponsor in the kibbutz and the influences of the sponsorship on the research. She states that "defining a research role for oneself is not entirely in one's hands. [...] it is tied; in part to the person (s) who facilitates one's entry [her sponsor] into the field and how close that interpersonal tie is" (p.33). Reinharz further discusses the constant negotiation that occurs as the researcher struggles to establish autonomy, creating new boundaries and roles in which to function.

In chapters four through seven the author discusses the characteristics (personal selves) of the researcher that provide the backdrop by which the phenomenon is being understood. Reinharz (2011) asserts that "all of these characteristics (being a mother, being a 33 year old woman, a wife, a Jew, and American) became lenses through which [she] examined [her] topic — aging on a kibbutz" (p.64). Her exploration of these

various characteristics and their influences offer the reader a framework from which to begin. The discussion presents additional factors that researchers may want to consider, as each of the characteristics may hold significant meanings in different cultures and context. Of significance in chapter four, the author presents a discussion regarding women researchers with children who embark on ethnographical studies and the conundrum they face as they struggle to “handle the responsibilities of parenting while also doing field work” (p. 66). She provides us with narrations of how the topic of motherhood and field research has been mainly absent from anthropological and sociological literature. The deficiency of an historical context in which to understand the concept of motherhood in fieldwork adds value to the author’s detailed description of her own experience as she balanced these roles.

Chapters eight through ten centered on those characteristics (situational self) which become visible in one’s role as a researcher in the field. These chapters highlight Reinharz’s (2011) ability to bring attention to the idea that we leave nothing untouched. As we immerse ourselves into an area in which to study, we take on various “selves.” In highlighting the influences each of these selves presents to the researcher, she states:

Some of these selves provided a steady stream of information (e.g. neighbor, homemaker, and hostess). Although I did not expect these roles to be relevant to my research, they became extremely meaningful and once again contributed to the array of lenses through which I learned about the kibbutz and its members. The emergence of selves helped me understand the fieldwork site itself, while the fieldwork site provoked understanding of my selves. I call the selves that arise out of, or rise to, the occasion “situational” because typically they do not last beyond the fieldwork situation (“friend” may last), although they are relevant at the time (p. 144).

Reinharz’s description of the formulation and emergence of selves provides fruitful considerations for readers who are interested in initiating an ethnographical study.

In the introduction Reinharz (2011) states “Observing the Observer is a book about and for social researchers who do fieldwork” (p. 1). She notes that the book “is designed for students who are in the process of learning how to do fieldwork themselves” (p. 1). While this book certainly lives up to the expectations of being a valuable tool for students and novice researchers, veterans of social research would also find it a good read. The author provides readers with an easy and interesting discussion, imparting valuable information that will be useful to the understanding and undertaking of fieldwork and the importance of observing the observer.

### References

Reinharz, S. (2011). *Observing the observer: Understanding our selves in field research*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

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**Author Note**

Michelle Manley received a Master of Science in Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Nova Southeastern University. She is currently continuing her education at the NSU Graduate School of Humanities and Sciences where she is pursuing a Ph.D. in Marriage and Family Therapy. Michelle's research interests include family and community, violence and its effect on family and community, narrative practices, restorative practices, conflict, and qualitative research. She can be contacted at 3301 College Avenue, Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33314-7796 USA; Telephone: 954.262.7482; Fax: 954.262.8456; E-mail: mmichell@nova.edu.

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