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Pitching a tent in the native village; Malinowski and participant observation


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PITCHING A TENT IN THE
NATIVE VILLAGE:
Malinowski and Participant Observation

'. . . I shall invite my readers to step outside the closed study of the theorist into the open air of the anthropological field . . . There, paddling on the lagoon, watching the natives under the blazing sun at their garden work, following them through the patches of jungle, and on the winding beaches and reefs, we shall learn about their life.'

Malinowski 1926

1. Introduction
The first photograph (Plate I) to be found in Bronislaw Malinowski's classic monograph, Argonauts of the Western Pacific (1922), is entitled 'The Ethnographer's tent on the beach of Nu'agasi', followed by the words 'This illustrates the manner of life among the natives'. Equally proudly the second photograph is presented (Plate II) of a Trobiand chief's personal hut, and in the caption below we read, 'To the left, among the palms, is the Ethnographer's tent, with a group of natives squatting in front of it'. Such scenes among the natives, as well as the poetic writing style as exemplified in the above quotation, have undoubtedly contributed to the reputation – one might almost say, the legend – of Malinowski the 'mystic hero' of participant observation (Levine, citing Stocking, 1985:339). Recently Levine reinforced the image by calling the Argonauts 'the first principled instantiation of participant-observation as the ne plus ultra of anthropological field methods' (Levine 1985:339).

While the term 'participant observation' has been broadened in the present decade to cover a range of fieldwork methods from non-participation through passive, moderate, active and complete participation (Spradley 1980:59-62), we will limit the term for our purposes to a

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situation where there is at least some interaction and involvement with the people being studied. Using Spradley's description (1980:60-61), this would mean either maintaining a balance between insider and outsider (moderate participation) or doing what the people are doing (active participation), not merely gaining acceptance, in order to better understand cultural rules for behavior. Hence, the adjective 'participant' becomes crucial for denoting interaction with and involvement in the society being studied. After glancing at Malinowski's background to seek influences there, this paper will examine the methods and techniques advocated by him, the degree and manner to which he engaged in participant observation himself, and the reasons why he is often regarded today as the father of intensive participant-observer field research.

2. Background and influences

Even staunch followers of Malinowski will not argue that he was the first to have practised and preached participant observation (assuming he did). One has only to think, for example, of Marco Polo, who became a member of the Kublai Khan's administrative staff as the ultimate 'participant' from whose post detailed accounts could be given; or of the missionaries and explorers of the 17th-19th centuries, some of whom learned the native language and lived among the people; or, more recently, Franz Boas, who apparently preached the method more than he practised it: he recommended knowledge of the indigenous language and an exhaustive accumulation of data but spent relatively little time in the field himself. Moreover, with regard to methodology, few of Boas's students have told us anything about how they gathered their data (R. Wax 1971:34). On the other hand, though Malinowski was not the first so-called participant observer, he may well have rightfully earned the place as the first professional anthropologist to provide his readers with an accurate and comprehensive account of how he carried out his fieldwork and recorded his data. Indeed, the introductory chapter to Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* has been an inspiration and guideline for empirical research done by those who 'travel into savage countries and study their inhabitants' since its appearance in 1922.

Although Malinowski and his *Argonauts* have almost become household words for anthropologists, a bit of background is in order. The Polish-born son of an eminent Slavic philologist and a well-educated mother, Malinowski grew up in an intellectual setting. In 1906 he graduated *cum laude* in philosophy and physics (having also studied mathematics, but not chemistry, as many scholars mistakenly assert) at the Jagiellonen University in Cracow (Skalnik 1982:31). At that time he was unable to pursue these fields any further due to his poor health; as he tells (1926/1954:93), the original English version of Frazer's *Golden Bough* was 'the only solace to his troubles'. Through this book he became fascinated with anthropology, calling it 'a great science, worthy
of as much devotion as any of her elder and more exact sister studies' (1926:94).

And devotion he gave. Malinowski went to London in 1910 as a post-graduate student at the London School of Economics. By 1913 he had published his first book, *The Family among the Australian Aborigines*, and in 1914, through the aid of C. G. Seligman, he was awarded two small scholarships in order to undertake field research in New Guinea. Since he was appointed secretary of the anthropological branch of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, he was to attend their meeting in Melbourne in the summer of 1914. As fate would have it, the First World War broke out at that time. Being a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, he was formally seen as an enemy and was required to report regularly to the Australian police (Skalník 1982:32); and because of the wartime situation, he was prevented from doing any but local travel. It was with the help of his anthropological friends that he gained permission to do fieldwork in New Guinea. He made three long expeditions to the islands, the first a half year on Toulon among the Mailu, and two year-long sojourns on the Trobriands (June 1915-May 1916, and Oct. 1917-Oct. 1918). During these periods Malinowski developed his methods and carried out his research, which was later to be seen as an important breakthrough in methodology and a major landmark in British social anthropology.

A couple of points should be made regarding the nutshell background given thus far. First, it was perhaps Malinowski's training in physics, mathematics and the scientific method which led him to develop scholarly, detailed techniques of intensive fieldwork. In the *Introduction* to the *Argonauts* he points out that

‘No one would dream of making an experimental contribution to physical or chemical science, without giving a detailed account of all the arrangements of the experiments; an exact description of the apparatus used ... (etc.) In Ethnography, where a candid account of such data is perhaps even more necessary, it has unfortunately in the past not always been supplied with sufficient generosity, and many writers do not ply the full searchlight of methodic sincerity, as they move among their facts and produce them before us out of complete obscurity.’ (1922:2-3.)

Such observation could still be made today of many recent writers, in spite of Malinowski’s example and plea for scientific methodology.

Another point to be taken from background information is the fact that Malinowski was more or less obliged to engage in fieldwork during the years 1914-1918, due to his citizenship and the isolating function of World War I. Michael Young claims that ‘there is no substance to the myth that he was “interned” in the Trobriands during the war’ (Young 1979:4). The fact remains, however, that Malinowski could not return to Europe, and it would have been asking a lot of the Australian officials to...
provide him with a job at a university. The irony of the matter is that Malinowski, as shown by his diary published posthumously in 1967, did not have the temperament to relish life among the natives. One gains the impression that the long field expeditions were like an interminable ordeal, and that only his self-discipline and insufferable ambition drove him on. Nowhere does Malinowski explain how or why he developed his radically new method involving being ‘left alone on a tropical beach close to a native village’. We do know that W. H. R. Rivers had written as early as 1913,

‘The essence of intensive work . . . is limitation in extent combined with intensity and thoroughness. A typical piece of intensive work is one in which the worker lives for a year or more among a community of four or five hundred people and studies every detail of their life and culture . . . by means of the vernacular language.’ (Rivers 1913:7.)

Malinowski’s contemporaries – Westermarck, Haddon, Seligman, and Rivers himself – had not gone so far as to fulfil these requirements of intensive research, though a great deal of so-called ‘survey work’ had been carried out. In any event it is certain, as pointed out by Young (1979:7), that the academic climate in Britain at the time was favourably disposed to innovations in ethnographic methods; and Malinowski may have sensed that he was the right man in the right place at the right time.

Considering that the negative entries in his diary far outweigh the positive ones with reference to Malinowski’s attitudes towards the natives and towards living in their midst (Hsu 1979:518), one is left wondering if this brilliant example of fieldwork is not a product of coincidence rather than pre-meditated choice. Would Malinowski have stuck it out so long in the name of science if he had not been more or less isolated by the war? Whether or not his method was made to accommodate the coincidence, whether or not his unbelievable work drive was a compensation for numerous frustrations this young Pole experienced under difficult and lonely field conditions, several facts remain: Malinowski was the first to make anthropology into an observational science by living near the natives; and he produced an unquestionable masterpiece of ethnographic fieldwork.

3. Malinowski’s methods

‘The principles of method can be grouped under three main headings; first of all, naturally, the student must possess real scientific aims, and know the values and criteria of modern ethnography. Secondly, he ought to put himself in good conditions of work, that is, in the main, to live without other white men, right among the natives. Finally, he has to apply a number of special methods of collecting, manipulating and fixing his evidence.’ (Malinowski 1922:6.)
Malinowski has been accommodating enough to summarize his field methods in the introduction to the *Argonauts*. Skimming over the first obvious principle of method with regard to having real scientific aims, we come to the principle of the work conditions: living right among the natives. We have already seen that Rivers (1913) had recommended the very situation in which Malinowski found himself. Whether the latter fulfilled the requirement of his second principle by choice or by chance, it is undisputable that he went through a veritable initiation, as he describes symptoms which were later to be classified as culture shock: ‘feelings of hopelessness and despair’; ‘I had periods of despondency, when I buried myself in the reading of novels, as a man might take to drink in a fit of tropical depression and boredom’ (Malinowski 1922:4).

In order to effectively be able to collect material, Malinowski states that one should ‘really be in contact with’ the natives. He gives his own definition to this phrase, however. For Malinowski, really being in contact with the natives is a matter of becoming inconspicuous, so that the natives carry on in their natural course, rather than the ethnographer empathizing with them. Malinowski makes clear in his introduction that the ‘native is not the natural companion for the white man, and after you have been working with him for several hours ... you will naturally hanker after the company of your own kind’ (1922:7). At the same time, he points out that, ‘as the natives saw me constantly every day, they ceased to be interested or alarmed ... In fact, as they knew that I would thrust my nose into everything, even where a well-mannered native would not dream of intruding, they finished by regarding me as part and parcel of their life, a necessary evil or nuisance, mitigated by donations of tobacco.’ (1922:7-8.) From the side of the natives it is amusing to note that, according to the missionary Baldwin, who spent thirty years in the Trobriands, Malinowski was mostly remembered as the ‘champion ass at asking damnfool questions, like, “Do you bury the seed tuber root end or sprout end down?”’ (Baldwin, cit. in Young 1979:14-15).

Fink (1955:62), who made a classification of four types of interaction, calls her third type ‘incomplete participation (or the Malinowski-type)’, in which there is little integration, but strong emphasis on the observation, which the observer overtly pursues. Malinowski himself had been very explicit right from the start, as he talked in a condescending tone about the natives, that he was by no means trying to live as they lived; living among the natives was for him a far cry from what is now called ‘going native’. Still, it was perhaps the excellence of his fieldwork and the novelty of his procedures that led, as Powdermaker (1967:36) suggests, to a ‘myth of Malinowski’s “extraordinary empathy”’. Powdermaker’s comment was in response to Geertz, who received the *Diary* in 1967. He claimed that publication of these journals had been shattering for anthropology’s image and had ‘destroyed one final idol’; that its achetypal...
fieldworker was a 'hypochondriacal narcissist' instead of being 'the fieldworker with extraordinary empathy for the natives' (Geertz 1967: 12). Geertz had clearly read the diary, but not the *Argonauts*—providing a good illustration of how legends grow in the anthropological world.

Though Malinowski never pretended to empathize with the natives and makes this openly known in his works, it admittedly comes as a bit of a shock when one reads in the diary, 'As for ethnology, I see the life of the natives as utterly devoid of interest or importance, something as remote from me as the life of a dog' (1967:167). But in the very next line he reveals the seriousness with which he took his work: 'During the walk, I made it a point of honor to think about what I am here to do. About the need to collect many documents. I have a general idea about their life and some acquaintance with their language, and if I can only somehow “document” all this, I’ll have valuable material.' (1967:167). This mention of documentation leads us to his third principle of method.

**b. Collecting and recording data**

At the end of his introductory chapter on subject, method and scope, Malinowski summarized three approaches to gathering data, calling them collectively the 'goal of ethnographic field-work'. Although the labels he gives to the techniques are rather cumbersome, this pioneering work in methodology is none the less valuable:

1. **The method of statistical documentation by concrete evidence.** In essence Malinowski explains here that the native society confronts the ethnographer with a vast chaos of seemingly unconnected data. Moreover, it would be futile to question the native in abstract, sociological terms in order to attempt making order out of the chaos; e.g., 'How do you treat and punish a criminal?' would be a useless question, even if one knew the proper words in the native language (1922:12). On the other hand, collecting a broad range of concrete data – observed incidences, genealogies, censuses, maps, diagrams showing ownership of garden land, lists of gifts, etc. – will gradually provide the resources for understanding the organization of the tribe and the ‘anatomy of its culture’. Once the data has been collected, the ethnographer will be able to make a ‘mental chart’; and ultimately, a wide variety of concrete information can be reduced to charts or synoptic tables extending through all aspects of native life. For example, a table can be drawn up of all the gifts and presents customary in a given society, including the sociological, ceremonial and economic definition of every item. Malinowski is careful to say that the ethnographer should make a tabularized presentation of his data, showing which are his own direct observations and which is indirect information, in order that no sources remain in obscurity. This scientific principle of verification is further illustrated as he provides a sample of a page entitled ‘Chronological List of Kula Events Witnessed by the Writer’, with dates, places and notes (1922:16).
In connection with this point of making an organized framework out of the seeming hodgepodge of native society, Lewis' reaction to Malinowski's diaries is worth mentioning: '. . . the diaries convey with almost agonizing truth a picture of the chaos in fieldwork which is often successfully concealed in the orderly production of a succession of well-balanced monographs' (Lewis 1968:349).

(ii) Recording the 'imponderabilia of actual life and of typical behaviour'. Within the skeletal outline, the 'flesh and blood' has to be added: the minute details of everyday life, for example, 'the occasional ripples of excitement over a feast or ceremony' (1922:17). Malinowski praises amateurs as being more successful at this than scientists have been thus far. Recording of such crystallized bits of data involves close contact with the natives (not necessarily empathy). Examples he gives are: the care given to the body, the manner of taking food and preparing it, the subtle manner in which personal vanities and ambitions are reflected, and hundreds of small incidents that occur.

It is interesting to note that in this section Malinowski recommends – however conservatively – real participant observation; and ironically, he considers himself, by being more 'naturally savage' through his Slavic background, to have been able to participate more easily than Western Europeans could have:

'. . . it is good for the Ethnographer sometimes to put aside camera, note book and pencil, and to join in himself in what is going on. He can take part in the natives' games, he can follow them on their visits and walks, sit down and listen and share in their conversations. I am not certain if this is equally easy for everyone – perhaps the Slavonic nature is more plastic and more naturally savage than that of Western Europeans – but though the degree of success varies, the attempt is possible for everyone' (1922:21).

Malinowski recommends as a possible way of recording these details, 'some form of ethnographic diary'. He was obviously not speaking of his own personal diaries, however. The latter were not written for scientific purposes (and one can even debate the propriety of their being published by his widow, a second wife by a late marriage). It is perhaps a good place to take a short side-trip to say something about this personal document: two diaries, written in Polish, covering Malinowski's first and third fieldwork periods (1914-1915 and 1917-1918).

Those who hoped to find a great deal of theorizing with regard to field data or techniques will have been disappointed. A few entries can be found, however, such as, 'Yesterday while walking I thought about the "preface" to my book: Jan Kubary as a concrete methodologist . . . I thought about my present attitude toward ethnographic work and the natives. My dislike for them, my longing for civilization' (1967:155). Or:
‘Ideas about methods of field work. The main principle of my work in the field: avoid artificial simplifications. To this end, collect as concrete materials as possible; note every informant; work with children, outsiders, and specialists. Take side lights and opinions’ (1967:290). But such entries are rare. Instead of being a theorizing tool, the diaries were used as a therapeutic release for all kinds of pent-up frustrations. Often, if he is not complaining about his poor health or telling of his longings for his fiancée, he is cursing the natives as ‘bloody niggers’. Hsu (1979:518) counted some 69 entries in which Malinowski expresses various degrees of aversion toward the natives. A glaring example: ‘On the whole my feelings toward the natives are decidedly tending to “Exterminate the brutes”’ (emphasis in original) (1967:69). These entries seem to be hard to rhyme with such (sparse) statements as in the introductory chapter of Argonauts, ‘... with the capacity of enjoying their company and sharing their games and amusements, I began to feel I was indeed in touch with the natives, and this is certainly the preliminary condition of being able to carry out successful fieldwork’ (1922:8). On the other hand, as Young (1979:14) has so aptly pointed out, if incongruences are found between the diaries and his works, then Malinowski is merely verifying his theory of human inconsistency. After all, it was he who found that reality was located somewhere in the gap between ideal and real, between what people say they do and what they actually do.

(iii) Making a corpus inscriptionum. One of Malinowski’s methods in which this very divergence between what people say they do and what they actually do could be tested was through the ‘collection of ethnographic statements, characteristic narratives, typical utterances, items of folk-lore and magical formulae’ (Malinowski 1922:24). Such a body of data he called a corpus inscriptionum, and its purpose was to document the native mentality.

This third method for achieving the ethnographer’s final goal – namely, ‘to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world’ (1922:25) – could be taken one step further, as seen ideally by Malinowski. The everyday speech, myths, magical formulae and the like, could be recorded in the vernacular. As Malinowski pointed out, translation of a statement often robbed the text of all its significant characteristics.

If one of the stringent qualifications of a good participant observer is that he/she speaks the native language, then Malinowski certainly wins points on this score. He was an accomplished linguist and put this ability to good use during his fieldwork; after six months he was able to operate without an interpreter. Before this time most (British) anthropologists had not been interested in the study of language as an integral part of their inquiry; bilingual informants or pidgin English had been used. Malinowski’s personal capabilities may have enhanced this area of his
methodology. He saw linguistic work as a valuable part of field studies and published important articles on language and Trobriand text material.

The second volume of *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (1935) is a prime example of a *corpus inscriptonium*. In a chapter called ‘An Odyssey of Blunders in Field-Work’ in this book, Malinowski gives a few cogent examples of how important he found conversing with the natives in their own language. He tells that early in his fieldwork he had written out a preliminary account of land tenure, which he unfortunately never published – ‘unfortunately, because it would have been an interesting document of errors in method’ (1935:325). He later discovered that the account held only some elements of the truth after he had learned to grasp ‘the native categories of thought’, which involves going far beyond a mere speaking knowledge of the language. It would appear that the cognitive anthropologists could find inspiration in such disclosures. Malinowski admits wisely in the same chapter, ‘I suffered at the time from a belief in infallible methods in field-work’ (1935:326).

As Urry points out (forthcoming), none of Malinowski’s students followed his example in stressing the importance of the vernacular. While they did not deny that it was ideal to learn the native language, this was because language was a means for collecting details on everyday life. In the participant observation which was to follow in the 1930’s, it was the first two of Malinowski’s methods (statistical documentation and detailed observation) which were given priority.

4. Summary
In his preface to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), Sir James G. Frazer stated that ‘Dr. Malinowski lived as a native among the natives for many months together . . .’ (Malinowski 1922:vii). Were it not for the fact that Malinowski’s methods were largely innovative for professional anthropology in those times, and that he and Frazer apparently belonged to some kind of ‘mutual admiration society’, one might wonder how well Frazer actually had read the *Argonauts*. Never once does Malinowski claim to have lived as a ‘native among the natives’, nor does he profess that this is desirable or necessary in order to gather good ethnographic data. As M. Wax (1972:10) notes, Malinowski’s works tend to reveal that it would hardly be possible to live as a Trobriand among the Trobriands without entering the web of kinship obligations and reciprocities, and engaging with the other men in intensive agriculture. Malinowski was on the margin. We might classify him in Spradley’s typology (1980:59) as practising passive participation. He held the place of a petty lord with servants, dealing out tobacco to insure tolerance from the natives for his incessant interrogations. Indeed, Malinowski was a questioner who worked a great deal with informants; and he was a systematic observer, for few people would have accumulated so
much data: statistical documentation reduced to charts for an overview of the societal framework; minute observations of daily life; and a wide range of original material, including myths and folklore, transcribed in the native language. For all his excellence as a questioner-observer, Malinowski was not an ‘active’ or even ‘moderate’ (Spradley 1980:60) participant, except on very rare occasions. Only once does he note in his diary, ‘To encourage them to play . . . I began to kasaysuya myself (a circle dance/game). I needed exercise, moreover I could learn more by taking part personally’ (1967:280-281). An unbridged gap existed between Malinowski and his Trobrianders. Some (e.g. Firth 1957; Fortes 1957; Nadel 1957; Leach 1957; Parsons 1957; Schapera 1957; cit. in Geertz 1967:12) attribute his frequent misinterpretation of Trobriand magic, religion, kinship, economy, law and psychology, to this gap. Though he gave the natives ‘flesh and blood’ hitherto seldom found in anthropological accounts, he made the error in his theoretical interpretations of portraying them as ‘Europeans in dusky skins’ (M. Wax 1972:12).

In spite of the ongoing myth of Malinowski the participant observer, he was merely a forerunner of the method. His experiences inspired many students and paved the way for the discovery of active participant observation as a field research method. Pitching one’s tent in a native village, while novel for the early years of this century, was still a step away from living in a native hut.

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