

## Tales from the Drop Zone: roles, risks and dramaturgical dilemmas

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**Tales from the Drop Zone:  
Roles, risks and dramaturgical dilemmas**

James Hardie-Bick and Susie Scott

**Abstract**

This paper critically revisits conventional understandings of ethnographic fieldwork roles, arguing that representations of the covert insider as heroic and adventurous are often idealistic and unrealistic. Drawing on one of the authors' experiences of being both a covert and overt researcher in an ethnographic study of skydiving, we identify some of the dramaturgical dilemmas that can unexpectedly affect relations with participants throughout the research process. Our overall aim is to highlight how issues of trust, betrayal, exposure and vulnerability, together with the practical considerations of field research, combine to shape the researcher's interactional strategies of identity work.

**Introduction**

In discussions of qualitative research methodology, ethnographic fieldwork is often regarded as providing important insights into the lived experience of those under study. To gain access to difficult-to-reach populations, deviant groups or restricted settings, the covert method is hailed as not only appropriate but also adventurous and heroic. This paper critically examines the assumptions embedded in this, and draws attention to the unrecognised problems of such a research strategy. Drawing on James Hardie-Bick's (2011) ethnographic study of skydiving as an empirical case study, we identify some of these issues, with a particular focus on dramaturgical dilemmas of self-presentation. We argue that the choice to adopt different field roles has pervasive effects on all stages of the research process, including the transition from covert to overt, and has enduring effects upon relations with participants.

## **The covert insider**

Traditional models of ethnography as a research strategy identify participant observation as its key defining method. It is assumed that in order to really understand another culture, one must immerse oneself within it for an extended period and live amongst its members (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Atkinson 2015). Sharing actors' experiences is the only way of gaining an interpretive understanding of the native point of view' (Malinowski 1922), or 'emic', subjective perspective, captured through rich and detailed 'thick description (Geertz 1973). Handbooks of ethnography advocate a 'lived familiarity' with the group or setting (Mercer 2007) and a proximity of social locations between researcher and researched (Hodkinson 2005). In Gold's (1958) famous typology of fieldwork roles, the 'complete participant' is the most respected as it implies a total commitment to the venture, a willingness to sacrifice one's other role-identities in order to absorb the most authentic data. In the Chicago School, Park's famous instruction to students to "go get the seat of your pants dirty in real research" was reinforced by the motto they were taught regarding first-hand experience in the field: 'You've got to touch it' (Platt 1995).

This somewhat idealised, rosy-coloured image of the method reaches its zenith in celebrations of covert participant observation as the ultimate display of risk-taking, with associated debates about the value of 'insider' research by current or former members (Banks 1998, Hodkinson 2005). Accomplishing insider status, or exploiting that which one already enjoys, is regarded as the ethnographic touchstone: a gold standard to aim towards. Being accepted and seamlessly integrating into a group allows methods to be unobtrusive (Kelleher 1993), as the ethnographer can intuitively grasp what participants mean and does not need to ask questions (Agar 1980).

The covert insider ethnographer is therefore depicted as a heroic role: someone who is bold enough to venture into the field at whatever cost and gather rich, qualitative data that could not be achieved any other way. This can have a political edge: Becker (1967) advocated not only 'taking sides' in research, but taking the side of the 'underdog' – the marginalised, deviant or disempowered – to make their interests

visible in academic theorising. Gouldner (1962) also urged sociologists to take risks in this way and to avoid being 'dull' or 'square':

*"This group of Chicagoans finds itself at home in the world of hip, Norman Mailer, drug addicts, jazz musicians, cab drivers, prostitutes, night people, drifters, grifters, and skidders, the cool cats and their kicks.... It prefers the offbeat to the familiar, the vivid ethnographic detail to the dull taxonomy, the sensuously expressive to dry analysis, naturalistic observation to formal questionnaires, the standpoint of the hip outsider to the square insider."*  
(Gouldner 1962: 208)

Implicit in these romantic myths of insiderness was an epistemological claim to credibility (Potter 1996) through interpretive omnipotence (Van Maanen 1988). Realist tales (Van Maanen 1988) were infused with a virtue ethics, whereby the simple fact of 'being there' conferred a status: the indisputable right to tell (Reed-Danahay 1997). By taking the 'native' point of view and being a mere vessel through which data flowed, it was presumed that the ethnographer gained a more 'authentic', subjectively meaningful understanding and their findings were more valid. The commitment and sacrifice they had made implied the trustworthiness of their accounts and the position from which they delivered them. In Goffman's (1974) terms, the researcher's 'footing' was, if not neutral, then positively and sympathetically biased towards representing their informants' interests.

We may regard this cynically as shrewd self-presentation. Potter (1996) describes a discursive strategy of 'interest invocation', whereby through 'confessing' to subjective values and biases, writers paradoxically make themselves appear more honest and therefore trustworthy (cf. Richardson 1990). There is a moral subtext of martyrdom to these knowledge claims: it is implied that the longer one spent in the field, the greater investments one made in the research (physically, mentally, emotionally and dramaturgically), the more one sacrificed of one's prior civilian self (Goffman 1961), and overall, the more one *suffered* for one's art – the more one deserves to be allowed

to tell their version of the story. The remainder of this paper critically explores how and to what extent these ideas translate into action in the field.

### **A parachuting sociologist**

This paper reflects on some of the dramaturgical dilemmas experienced by James during his ethnographic research on skydiving (Hardie-Bick 2011; Hardie-Bick and Bonner 2016). This research involved 15 months of fieldwork at a British Parachute Association affiliated parachute centre ('Drop Zone') in the United Kingdom. This consisted of covert and overt participant observation at the parachute centre and fourteen semi-structured interviews with skydivers representing different levels of ability (Hardie-Bick 2011). The overall aim of the research was to explore the values, norms, behaviour and experiences that typify the social world of skydiving. Taking into account the contrasting research findings in relation to the motives that attract people to engage in adventurous pursuits (Lyng 1990; Csíkszentmihályi 1975; Kerr and MacKenzie 2012), a combination of covert and overt roles was adopted. The methodological decision to 'get inside the defining process of the actor in order to understand his action' (Blumer 1986: 16) was not taken lightly. Participant observation may be 'the most personally demanding and analytically difficult method of social research to undertake' (May 1997: 138), but, with its aim of being true to participants' experiences, it is also one of the most ethical. As Atkinson (2015: 5) puts it, ethnography "is a profoundly ethical form of enterprise, based as it is on a commitment to other people's everyday lives". Lyng (1998) also highlighted the importance of participant observation for penetrating the meanings surrounding skydiving-related activities. Reflecting on his research on 'edgework', he recalled how a skydiver told him, "If you want to know what it's like, then do it!" (1998: 224). Similarly, James found that many skydivers believed that the unique experience of skydiving was ineffable. One of his informants stated that the only reason he was willing to be interviewed was because James was 'learning to do it' himself.

To a certain extent gaining access to the local parachute centre was simply a matter of 'turning up' and enrolling on one of the training courses. Nevertheless, access is

rarely as straightforward as it may initially appear (Douglas 1976, Hammersley and Atkinson 2005). Simply turning up was only the first stage of a complex and drawn-out process of gaining access to this research setting. The first dilemma was whether to adopt an overt or covert strategy to conduct the fieldwork. Having read a range of ethnographic studies that directly reflect on these issues (Adler 1993, Ditton 1977, Douglas 1976, Holdaway 1983, Wolf 1991), James decided to start with a covert strategy, in order not to interfere with the 'normal' course of activities at the Drop Zone. After registering for the training course, the Chief Central Instructor believed that he was simply someone who was interested in taking up skydiving. The following fieldnotes extract illustrates how James reasoned with himself:

I was tempted to explain that I was carrying out research on skydiving, and I was prepared to offer a detailed explanation of my research interests. No one else was waiting to speak to him. He was enthusiastically explaining the various disciplines of skydiving and asked me why I was interested in taking up the sport. This was a perfect opportunity for being completely open and honest. I resisted the temptation. I decided against providing a detailed summary of my research and informed him that I had always liked the idea of skydiving, that it was something that I had wanted to experience for years but never got round to. I felt my deceit was justified and my justifications were similar to many other ethnographers. I did not want to be treated differently from anyone else and I was worried about causing any unnecessary suspicion.

Whilst aware of the serious ethical issues concerning covert research (see Holdaway 1983) James reassured himself that he would not be adopting a covert role throughout the whole of his fieldwork. Using a similar technique to Wallis (1977), his covert role was an initial, temporary and convenient strategy for understanding the ways in which the complete novice was processed and how they were treated by other skydivers at the centre. For the first nine weeks he adopted a covert role. He attended the training course, talked and listened to other students and skydivers, made several static line

jumps and asked as many questions as possible. Although Wolf (1991) felt that asking 'too many' questions in his research on bikers threatened to blow his cover, the majority of skydivers and instructors expected an inquisitive attitude from enthusiastic students, and so his continuous questioning did not seem to arouse any suspicion.

### **Problems and conflicts of covert research**

Nevertheless, the initial covert stage of the research did cause some difficulties for the ethnographer: practically, dramaturgically and ethically. With James's awareness of these issues came a growing sense of unease, and the burden of conducting fieldwork undercover became uncomfortably heavy.

On a practical level, James encountered many of the obstacles and hurdles that have long been recognised in covert ethnography (Bulmer 1982; Calvey 2008; Hammersley & Atkinson 2005; Lofland and Lofland 1995). For example, he was restricted in the range of situations that he could observe, being able to access only those settings to which he could legitimately claim the right to be present in his role as a novice student. Thus he was able to observe the training sessions, jumps in which he was participating and some public areas of the Drop Zone, but not the more restricted backstage regions (Goffman 1959) where the staff and students relaxed out of role, dropping their frontstage masks. It is in these latter contexts that participants often communicate 'out of character' (Goffman, *ibid.*), speaking 'off the record' to reveal information that can be crucial in undermining the official story they have presented as an emergent team impression (*ibid.*).

The recording and storage of data posed another practical challenge, insofar as this had to be conducted secretly to avoid arousing suspicion (cf. Ditton 1977). James could not record events in the moment, as they happened, but must instead store up experiences by memory for post-hoc recall. He adopted a 'participating-in-order-to-write' approach (Emerson et al. 2001: 356), training himself to make mental jotted notes of his surroundings, impressions and conversations (*ibid.*) and orientated his

'consciousness to the task of remembering' significant events (Lofland and Lofland 1995: 90). When the volume, richness or intensity of data made this impractical, an alternative strategy was to remove himself from the immediate situation, exiting the frontstage while the performance was still in full swing. Thus James devised calculated strategies for taking leave from focused encounters (Goffman 1961) and retreating to the backstage region. He rehearsed narrative lines of excuse and justification as accounting procedures (Scott and Lyman 1968) that provided a believable pretext for his action:

I usually made notes in my car, which I always parked away from the main hangar to avoid detection. I justified my short absences in a variety of ways: 'I'm just going to get my sandwiches from the car'; 'I'm just going to make a quick phone call'; 'I think I left my gloves in the car, back in a moment'; 'I've left my money in the car' etc. (fieldnotes)

This in turn created dramaturgical dilemmas. While acting as a complete participant (Gold 1958), James had to self-consciously monitor his behaviour to ensure that he was 'acting natural' (Goffman 1969) with the breezy nonchalance of a native member, giving a sufficiently convincing performance to 'pass' as one of them (Goffman 1963). He became increasingly aware of the performative aspect of his fieldwork, as a role enacted in the frontstage region (through his encounters with the staff and parachute students), and how this was contradicted by his thoughts and feelings while 'off duty' between observation sessions. If we accept dramaturgy's claims that there is a core, essential self – the actor behind the character, who strategically designs its image (Scott 2015) - then it was in these backstage moments away from the field that James experienced his 'real', authentic self to be residing.

This discrepancy between his virtual (projected) and actual (subjectively experienced) identities (Goffman 1963) created a growing sense of discomfort and unease. Expressing similar concerns to Calvey (2008), James felt a sense of constant low-level anxiety at the prospect of his cover being blown, his 'real' self exposed, and his attempts to pass as an insider being foiled. Such discrediting of identity claims



threatens to 'spoil' an actor's social face and 'fatefully' damage their future relations with others (Goffman, *ibid.*). Maintaining a line of action that is inconsistent with one's private self-identity is dramaturgically stressful, as it demands reflexive monitoring and vigilance to potential face threats (Brown and Levinson 1978). Skills of information control (Goffman 1963) are required as the actor makes constant decisions about whether, what and how much to disclose to others, and must remember which versions of themselves these various audiences know.

The deceptive element of this dramaturgical work raises ethical issues, which challenge the aforementioned image of the ethnographer as someone honest, credible and authentically committed to their art. This does not, of course, mean that covert researchers are duplicitous and untrustworthy, but rather serves as a reminder that mild forms of deception are ubiquitous in everyday life, and when well-intentioned by motives of tact, diplomacy and face-saving, can even be functional for micro-social interaction order (Scott 2012). Goffman (1959) argued that it is impossible to be completely honest and transparent with others, for there is always some misleading, misrepresentation or selective disclosure of information. Covert ethnography involves situated ethics that must be (re-)negotiated with participants throughout the research process (Calvey 2008). This is not Machiavellian but rather a matter of pragmatic decision-making, or situated intelligence (Smith 2006). In our encounters both in and off the field, we act as undercover agents, shrewdly and secretively gathering intelligence (Goffman 1969). Even overt ethnographers sometimes engage in strategies that are sneaky and subtly manipulative, to glean valuable data: Douglas (1976) talks of 'playing dumb' and 'flattering' informants, while Adler and Adler (2002) discuss the challenge of getting a 'reluctant respondent' to open up. Thus fieldwork, as a role performance, can be enacted cynically rather than sincerely (Goffman, *ibid.*) with detachment or role distance (Goffman 1961) from the part that one is playing. Far from 'going native', the covert ethnographer remains acutely aware of the split between their backstage actor-self and their currently projected 'self-in-role' (Chriss 1999).

## Going overt

The dynamic and constantly changing nature of fieldwork and field relations means that one's role is constantly changing. Ethnographers may shift position along the spectrum of insiderness-outsiderness (Banks 1998), enjoying moments of greater or lesser involvement with participants and immersion in their worlds (Pike 1990). Typically in covert research conducted as a complete participant, the shift is towards increasing integration (going native), and this can compromise the researcher's ability to separate their private self (and its incumbent thoughts and feelings) from the role they are instrumentally playing. Sharing experiences with participants almost inevitably leads to empathy and identification, and this can blur the carefully constructed boundaries between self and others. For example, in their study of parenting young people with learning disabilities, Cooper and Rogers (2015) discuss how practising mutual disclosure and building rapport with interviewees led to awkwardness, confusion and ambiguity about their roles as simultaneously researchers, acquaintances, confidantes and friends.

One way of avoiding this role engulfment is to blow one's own cover and 'go overt'. This offers the advantage of immediate relief from the dramaturgical stress and pressures of passing, as well as from the ethical guilt of deception. However, given the aforementioned heroic status of the covert insider, going overt carries negative connotations of anti-climax and disappointment: the overt ethnographer may be seen as sacrificing data depth and richness, and lacking total commitment to their role. They may now expect to gather only limited, superficial data, as participants become more guarded in their disclosures.

After several weeks into his research James was on first-name terms with some of the instructors. Nevertheless, aside from the occasional advice about technique or equipment provided by some of the regular skydivers, observations were largely restricted to the training sessions with other novice parachutists and instructors. In order to gain access to the wider skydiving community, he decided to take his research to the next stage and adopt an overt approach. Whilst he had initially planned to

spend far longer as a covert researcher, he felt increasingly uncomfortable in that role. On a personal level, it felt unnecessarily deceptive, and James looked forward to being open about his intentions. At the same time, making this transition generated a certain amount of anxiety as he worried about how his fellow students, instructors and skydivers would react when they discovered he was carrying out research.

To make this transition as smooth as possible, James worked on a plausible 'telling story' (Goffman 1989). There are various non-threatening strategies that researchers can adopt in this situation. One strategy involves 'deliberate misperception', whereby researchers try to confuse their informants with academic jargon, so they believe the research is so abstract that its conclusions 'will have no substantive or practical relevance to anyone' (see Douglas 1976: 170). However, this implied further dishonesty. Having spent the past nine weeks as a covert researcher, taking Douglas's advice would only have increased the ethical dilemmas. Rather than deliberately creating confusion surrounding his research interests, the overt role allowed him to generate curiosity about his research. James decided on a 'telling story' that explained both his interest in what motivates people to engage in extreme sports, and why he had decided to focus on skydiving in particular. It was now just a matter of waiting for the right opportunity.

Such an opportunity took him by surprise. After his fourth jump one of the skydivers (Steve) approached him and explained how he had flared the parachute slightly early and asked other questions relating to his jump. As Steve worked in the reception, he knew how many times James had jumped and had previously offered encouraging comments relating to his progression. Steve informed him that his technique was 'pretty good' for the fourth jump and asked if he was staying around for a drink in the bar. Such an invitation had not previously occurred. James knew this was the opportunity he had been waiting for and started to feel increasingly nervous about what he was about to do.

James bought a drink and looked at the various skydiving photographs scattered around the bar. After a few minutes Steve came over and sat on a stool next to him.

He ordered a drink and they talked about skydiving. Steve then asked him why he decided to take up the sport. His response was direct and to the point: 'Well, I'm actually carrying out research on extreme sports and I've always liked the idea of skydiving so I thought I'd give it a go'.

To James's surprise and relief, Steve reacted positively. He expressed interest and invited James to tell him more about the research. Furthermore, the participant wanted to be helpful. Steve asked if James had interviewed anyone at the Drop Zone, and he explained how he intended to approach skydivers over the next few weeks. Steve agreed to be interviewed and said he was intrigued as to what kind of questions he would be asked. Steve also said he was willing to introduce him to other skydivers who might be interested in taking part the following Saturday.

James felt satisfied with the progress he had made. He felt relieved that he would no longer be conducting covert research and he had now made a good contact with someone who was clearly interested in his research and willing to introduce him to other experienced skydivers. However, this positive start was only one aspect of the overt role. James soon realised that this transition towards greater openness made some of the skydivers suspicious of his intentions.

### **Effects on relations with participants**

Becoming overt changes the relationship between a fieldworker and their participants. Previously, the covert ethnographer had enjoyed 'interpretive omnipotence' (Van Maanen 1988) as the authoritative source of knowledge: choosing what and where to observe, presenting their own version of events without challenge, and protecting their secret identity as a researcher. In Goffman's (1963) model of stigma, a 'discreditable' attribute such as this – one that is not inevitably visible – affords its bearer more agency in being able to conceal it, and pass as a 'normal' member. The discrepancy between their virtual (claimed) and actual selves is not apparent and can be managed by careful strategies of information control.

Now, however, the power dynamics have shifted and the tables have turned. Once the researcher's identity is revealed and becomes publicly 'knownabout' (Goffman 1963), this inevitably changes how they are perceived and responded to. The virtual/actual discrepancy becomes apparent, 'spoiling' their previous identity claims. The researcher may be redefined in the participants' eyes as an imposter: deceptive, fraudulent and no longer to be trusted. The quiet, unobtrusive role they had previously enjoyed is no longer tenable as they are thrust into the spotlight. Suddenly conspicuous as the 'outsider within', they are rendered visible through their perceived intrusiveness. James found that he was now referred to as "the extreme sports guy", a belittling label that reduced him to his researcher role and implied its triviality. He recalls how he felt at this point:

When I returned to the Drop Zone the following weekend I knew that my overt role would bring a new dimension to my research. As Steve worked at the Drop Zone and clearly knew many of the regulars, I felt as if the tables had turned. Not only did I want to know about them, but the skydivers would now also want to know about me, who I was and why I wanted to interview them. I would now have to be prepared to answer questions relating to my research, and I could be questioned by anyone at any time. Now that I had voluntarily taken off my disguise I felt exposed as I could no longer simply pretend to be 'one of them'.

It is striking how the tone of the fieldnotes changes here, such calm self-assurance is replaced by a disarming sense of vulnerability. His feeling of exposure, though initiated by his own actions, has generated 'fateful' consequences beyond his control. The rug has been pulled out from under him, and he feels precarious, anxious and uncertain about what will happen. His overt role makes him accountable for his actions, so he worries that he might be called upon this at any moment: "*I would now have to be prepared to answer questions relating to my research, and I could be questioned by anyone at any time.*" Dramaturgically speaking, he has removed the mask of character ("*I had voluntarily taken off my disguise*"), exposing his 'true' self to

the audience, whom he anticipates to be critical. No longer able to hide behind the safety of the researcher role, with its carefully designed and scripted front, he now appears in an improvised performance 'as himself': *"the skydivers would now also want to know about me, who I was and why I wanted to interview them."*

From the audience's perspective, this revelation may evoke feelings of betrayal. Research participants recognise they have been duped: effectively insulted by the presumption of their gullibility. As Simmel (1908) argued, secret-keeping is a thrilling but risky venture because it threatens relationships of trust. Through the 'fascination of betrayal', a bond between peers of equal status is reimagined as one of exploitation. Craib's (1994) psychoanalytic notion of 'disappointment' is relevant here, as the victims of duplicity realise that nobody is quite who they seem, and certainly not wholly 'good' (cf. Zimbardo 2007).

On one occasion two of the students who I had trained with whilst conducting covert research confronted me in the canteen: "You know when you asked us how we felt before doing our first jump? You weren't actually concerned at all, were you? You just wanted to know because of your research".

Such reactions of moral indignation reconfigure the power dynamics within the group. In the symbolic form of Garfinkel's (1956) degradation ceremony, betrayed victims can now claim the moral high ground, asserting their right to judge and sanction. The shamed offender stands helplessly before them, asking their forgiveness.

This is illustrated by two scenarios that James experienced after 'coming out' as overt. In the first, he was in the hangar with two other students, getting 'kitted up' in overalls in preparation for a jump. This was an important ritual that the actors carried out in their backstage region (Goffman 1959), which helped them get into character as skydivers. It was a time before the performance when they might experience stage fright, anticipating what could go wrong, and reflecting self-consciously upon themselves as fallible actors (Scott, 2015). Thus at this moment, he was nervously running through the safety procedures in his mind, not yet in role as either a

parachutist or a researcher. He was caught off-guard when two participants approached him as if he were in character, attempting to engage him in a focused encounter (Goffman 1961):

[Steve] was laughing at my jump suit which was clearly too small. I smiled, made a gesture to confirm that it looked ridiculous, and started to find a larger one... He then introduced me to Paul, [who asked] "So you're doing research on extreme sports?" I agreed and he looked confused. "What do you want to know about skydivers, then?"

Although I had tried to prepare myself for this type of question, the last thing I wanted to do was to explain my research just before I was going to jump. My usual pre-jump ritual involved focusing my attention on what I was about to do and trying to deal with my increasing nerves by concentrating on my breathing. Such techniques were not available now. I had to explain myself to Paul.

Here, James became flustered because he was unprepared for frontstage interaction, and caught out by its abrupt start. He was wrong-footed, temporarily losing control of the performance, and with it his dramatic and directorial dominance (Goffman 1959): his central role as the protagonist, and his command over the staging of this show. Loss of poise is a common trigger of embarrassment (Miller 1996) as the actor who cannot meet their role requirements (Gross and Stone 1964) feels at the mercy of audience scrutiny. James was in the process of transition into character, a liminal stage (Turner 1967) between two identities, when he was *becoming* something different but not yet in that role.

This feeling of not being 'ready' to perform and being caught off-guard was noted by Goffman (1956) in his essay on embarrassment. We need periods of time backstage to 'warm up' for interaction, as well as to wind down from it, and if we are denied these opportunities, there is a risk of losing face. Schwartz (1954) gives the example of transitions in and out of the sleep role: waking up suddenly in public is

embarrassing, as we have not had time to compose ourselves and prepare an acceptable social face. In the above scenario, the researcher was involuntarily yanked into the spotlight of the frontstage region and expected to spontaneously perform in role. The participants denied him the opportunity to prepare a line of action and control his self-presentation, but rather demanded that he be accountable for himself – his real self. This feeling of vulnerability through exposure was a disempowering experience.

The second example concerns the use of jokes, teasing and humour in the participants' treatment of the researcher. Though seemingly benign, such symbolic gestures can be significant in communicating attitudes of distaste, displeasure and disapproval. By monitoring and regulating fellow actors' behaviour in line with group norms, humour functions as a subtle mechanism of informal social control. Podilchak (1991) suggests that playful forms of interaction, particularly fun, serve as social levellers by challenging and subverting status hierarchies. When directed at a person in power to undermine their authority, fun is a symbolic act of resistance (Fincham 2016). Thus James recounts some memorable experiences of taunting that occurred after the participants found out about his 'true' identity:

Steve introduced me to Stewart, whose response demonstrated that he had been briefed: "Ahh, *you're* the extreme sports guy!". He then proceeded to inform the whole group that I was the guy who's doing research on extreme sports. "He wants to interview everyone!!" His humour and the overall group response were not hostile and I laughed with them. "If that's OK with you", I light-heartedly responded. "Oh, hold on", Stewart states, "has the interview started yet?". He is now raising his voice, making sure that everyone can hear. "Are you secretly recording this? Am I being interviewed now?". I confidently tell him that the interview had "definitely not started". Stewart laughed at another skydiver's suggestion that I should be 'frisked' before introducing people to me.



There is a lot going on in the interaction dynamics of the above incident, expressing micro-social gestures of power and resistance. The initial introduction of James as “the extreme sports guy”, as noted above, is a belittling attribution: by reducing him to his researcher role and trivialising this, they snub him and undermine his authority. The jokes about him wanting to interview everyone, though understood as not overtly hostile, make cautionary reference to his duplicity by implying that he is not sincerely friendly and has ulterior motives. The dramatic tension escalates as Stewart raises his voice and asks if he is being secretly recorded, “making sure that everyone can hear”. Stewart wants to emphasise to his team-mates that things are not as they appear and warn them the researcher is not to be trusted. James tries to deflect the tension by joking back, but this is not accepted by the group: they want this to be an action that *they* perform to him as an excluded audience, not a fellow team-mate. There is a slightly menacing undertone to the way that group members relish colluding in this ‘cutting out procedure’ (Smith 1978; Lemert 1962) as an act of symbolic violence. Stewart takes delight in his peer’s suggestion that James should undergo a ‘frisk’ search, which in institutional settings is a ‘mortification ritual’, designed to humiliate and degrade (Goffman 1963; cf. Garfinkel 1956).

In another incident, the participants joked about restricting his opportunities to carry out the fieldwork:

One skydiver even said that I could only interview him in the plane whilst climbing to altitude and that I was not allowed to take any notes. Other skydivers laughed at his unreasonable conditions and although he was only joking I knew that he was not interested in taking part.

This too is significant in communicating a shift in power relations. Though “only joking”, the message and intent are serious. By suggesting a scenario in which the researcher is hindered by difficult conditions, and where he would be nervous, vulnerable and lacking self-control, the participants are reminding him that he is not in fact omnipotent. He could be disempowered, and they are the ones who would instigate this. They hint to the fieldworker that they resent having been taken for

fools, that they are not 'cultural dopes' (Garfinkel 1967) and may potentially exact revenge: the mere threat of this is enough to put the researcher in his (new) place amongst them. He is summarily reminded that the tables have turned, the power is now in their hands, and they will set the agenda from now on. Whether or not they continue to participate in the study, what and how much they disclose, will now be on their terms. He must now defer to the group's authority in appraising him for reacceptance, and work hard to regain their trust:

Stewart continued to refer to me as 'the extreme sports guy' for the duration of my research and as an overt researcher I always felt that I was never totally accepted. I would always feel awkward when Stewart shouted out "It's the extreme sports guy!" or "How's the research going?" while I was training with the other students, or walking out to the plane to make another jump.

As this quotation demonstrates, although the covert stage of the research only lasted for the first nine weeks, the effects of this strategy continued to resonate throughout the remainder of the study.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has highlighted some of the dramaturgical dilemmas that surround the use of the covert participant observation method in ethnographic research. Whereas the conventional wisdom about this technique has presented an idealistic, and perhaps unrealistic, picture of a heroic risk-taking venture, the practical lived experience may be somewhat different. In addition to the already recognised problems of practicality (gaining access, recording data secretly) and ethics (deception of participants), we have shown how the covert researcher can also face a range of dramaturgical dilemmas of self-presentation and impression management (Goffman 1959). Lingering issues of trust and betrayal, together with the precariousness, risks and unpredictability of being discovered, create a sense of uncertainty and vulnerability. Dramaturgical stress arises from the need to defend credibility and keep face while avoiding loss of poise, footing and directorial dominance (Goffman, *ibid.*). We have

shown how these tensions may be particularly salient with some participants and other members of the setting. They may also endure throughout the study, even after 'coming out' as a researcher and making the transition from a covert to an overt position. While there should always be a place for covert strategies in ethnographic fieldwork (Calvey 2008), we hope that this discussion has highlighted some potential problems and dramaturgical dilemmas that can compromise this research strategy. Fieldwork is therefore a balancing act between the different roles the researcher can adopt and their 'real' self as the actor behind these characters. Managing this tension is an ongoing challenge that involves complex interactional strategies of identity work.

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