

Worksheet 2: Notes from the field research

“From June 2004 to May 2006, I conducted field research on industrialized slaughterhouse work in the Great Plains of the United States. For the first five and a half months of this period, I worked full- time on a slaughterhouse kill floor for nine to twelve hours each day (starting between 5:00 and 7:00 a.m. and finishing anywhere between 4:00 and 6:30 p.m.), Mondays through Fridays, with the possibility of mandatory overtime on Saturdays.

The slaughterhouse employed over eight hundred workers, the large majority of whom were immigrants from Central and South America, Southeast Asia, and Africa. Approximately twenty- five hundred cattle per day were killed and processed at the slaughterhouse, which shipped meat to various distributors within the United States and internationally. I spent the last eighteen months of my time in the field conducting, on a much less grueling schedule, participant- observation research and interviews with community and union organizers, slaughterhouse workers, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) federal meat inspectors, cattle ranchers, and small (custom) slaughterhouse operators. (...)

For a variety of reasons—primary among them the goal of encountering the slaughterhouse through the lived experiences of those who participated in its daily activities—I decided to attempt direct access by applying as an entry- level employee at several industrialized slaughterhouses in the central United States. After three mornings of returning to a crowded employment trailer outside one of the plants, I was hired to work on the kill floor. (...)

There was the tension inherent in the dual role I played both as slaughterhouse worker and researcher. In many ways, when my ten-to-twelve-hour day at the slaughterhouse was over, my work as a researcher was just beginning. At the end of each day I struggled, often unsuccessfully, to sit at my desk and translate into words the experiences, impressions, and conversations of the day. No matter how strongly I identified with my fellow workers during the day, this forced time of writing and reflection served as a constant reminder (...) [that I was an observer]¹.



¹ Source: Pachirat, T. (2021). Six The Political in Political Ethnography: Dispatches from the Kill Floor. In E. Schatz (Ed.), Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power (pp. 143-162). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226736785-009>

Questions (for discussion or to answer independently):

What is the fieldwork site?

What can be some of the challenges and risks of choosing this research site and fieldwork analysis?

What are the benefits of conducting this type of research?

What are the ethical requirements of this study? What are the implications? (Hint: what are the consequences of doing fieldwork incognito (not revealing the purpose of research) compared to revealing the purpose of research?)

What does it mean to be an “active participant” in this research?

What kind of interactions could the researcher study based on this fieldwork?

Do you think the findings of this study can be used to generate a theory?

The section with a bracket is the researcher reflecting on his role(s) – describe what the tension is in the fieldwork and how to overcome it, in your opinion.
