Diary of a Supermarket Shelf-Stacker: or how I learned to stop worrying and love ethnography

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This paper represents work-in-progress. The overall study it informs takes as its central concern the construction of meaning and identity by people labelled as having learning difficulties. The background to the study is related to a perceived inadequacy of the social model of disability to represent the experience of learning difficulty as a sufficiently separate epistemological and ontological entity. The overall intention is to promote a first-person narrative account. This general approach encourages participation of the respondents in contributing autobiographical material and in so doing a narrative thread emerges which can help to connect the individual to their past. As Santayana reminds us, if we do not remember our past we may be condemned to repeat it. For the people I have been involved with, this would not be a comfortable option.

This extract is an account of some time the author spent undertaking participant observations with one of a group of individuals who form a research team. What will be shared in this article is some of the confusion around theory and method that can occur when fieldwork replaces deskwork in the research process. The events related here are narrated, and I stress that term, in a form which lies somewhere between fact and fiction. There is, after all, no ultimate 'truth' which exists 'out there' as facts were once thought to exist. Instead we must be content with the convenient fiction of sociological inquiry that can and must be
contested. Any relationship therefore, between the events described and any persons, living or dead, must be seen as purely coincidental.

I have also included some observations from my field notes made at the time with the intention of providing a sense of the immediacy. Events revealed inadequacies and some of the inadequacies present in conducting observations I must own up to as mine or at least of my own making. These very practical problems, as well as the more esoteric, even philosophical difficulties that immediately surround the practising social scientist as soon as they step outside the library or the office are the stuff of life. Or so my supervisor tells me. It’s not, believe me, like it is in the movies. The theories dissolve, the paradigms shift, and the concepts won’t keep still. And so it is that I come among you today to offer these extracts from the diary of a supermarket shelf-stacker.

So if you’re sitting comfortably, then I’ll begin.

Many nurses will often have overheard the remark or perhaps even remarked themselves that it could be a good job if it weren’t for the patients. Likewise I’ve heard university lecturers make similar comments about their students, the difference being, of course, that the lecturers actually meant what they said. But it was only recently that I came to appreciate that supermarket workers shared this antagonistic relationship with their customers. Weeks of stacking shelves with bread and neatly date arranging gallons of milk in serried ranks only to come back from a coffee break and find that customers have spoiled the display by buying the stuff has led me to conclude that customers are the very last people who should be allowed through the doors of a supermarket.

My time in the supermarket was fieldwork rather than any form of retail therapy. I was there, if you like, under false pretences and also under the terms and conditions as set out for the employees of ‘the supermarket which must remain nameless’ (herein after referred to as TSWMRN). But if you ever felt you needed ‘more reasons’ to shop there, well, now you do indeed have at least one more reason to shop at TSWMRN.

I approached TSWMRN via their personnel office. After an initial interview in which I explained that my interest was strictly academic (in the scholastic
sense rather than simply irrelevant) I got the job, the white shirt, the clip-on tie and the apron, all of which comprise the uniform of the shelf-stacker in the fresh foods section. I agreed to wear the black trousers (smart, but casual) the black shoes and to remove my earrings when on duty. I didn’t, however, get the staff discount, not being a company employee *per se*.

I mention this particular detail because the principal reason for my stint in the supermarket was to work alongside a man with learning difficulties. He was then, and remains, part of a participant research group I had set up to investigate issues around meaning and identity as they are experienced by people with learning difficulties. My reasoning was that by shadowing him in this way I might gather some clues as to how he constructed his identity as a supermarket worker and how this in turn was perceived by his fellow workers in TSWMRN.

What did we do, me and my buddy? We stacked shelves. Me, not an employee, being employed and insured elsewhere: him, not an employee either, being subcontracted from an outside agency and, incidentally, paid at 60% of the going-rate for shelf-stackers doing an identical job. The agency funded the shortfall.

When I later discovered that staff discount was not available in the off-licence regardless of employment status I felt a bit better about it but I hung on to the data nevertheless.

**Extract 1:**

I arrive at TSWMRN. It has a lo-tech feel to it; not supermarket, more big grocery shop. There’s something about the 52 bus route, the drunk on the bus I argued with and the increasing number of smokers in this area of town. Is this just prejudice?

At the customer help desk a woman has a customer to deal with but tells me to wait and she’ll detail somebody to take me to admin.

She hails a guy called Trevor. I’d just seen him in the trolley area. He’s borderline. He tells me to come upstairs and off he goes without a look back. I follow. We get to a staff area; canteen to one side, clocking-in point, visitor sign-
in desk, manager’s office and other glass-cubicle style offices. I can see the personnel office.

I decide I’d better look the part and start taking notes. I remember a bit from Okely (1983) and how she adopted the funnel approach. Record everything. Well, here goes….

Trevor tells me to take a seat and tells the admin. clerk I’m here to see Janice (or Janis as she spells it) then he goes to her office to tell her I’m here. I can make out a head looking up to catch sight.

He comes by and tells me again to take a seat, with a bit more emphasis. I tell him thanks and he goes off, looking back and perhaps slightly miffed that I haven’t actually sat down.

I sit down. There’s a woman in the manager’s office (the manager?). I think she’s looking at a screen. A few minutes later a guy dressed casually (and in civvies) leans in the door without knocking and talks to her. They both emerge soon after and go downstairs. A guy in a uniform arrives at the manager’s office a few minutes later, sees it’s empty and walks in.

Somebody comes over and introduces herself. I look up. It’s Janis. Very lo-tech office. She apologises that it’s untidy (!) [she hasn’t seen mine]. We chat. It’s all very amicable. Things are fine. I get the job. She admits to being thirty something, wants to do media studies. She’s all in black. Shoes, tights, skirt, poloneck top, black hair too.

We talk about the arrangement with Remploy. The guys who get the jobs are assessed as to their abilities (Rich is at 60%) and Remploy invoice TSWMRN for the remaining 40%. The guys remain on Remploy’s books though they work under TSWMRNs full terms and conditions.

I throw in the line about wanting to interview the staff as well and this doesn’t seem to be a problem. All in all it’s a good day’s work. Even the 52 back isn’t so bad.

[end of extract]

The ethnographic approach to data-gathering adopted and adapted the methods of anthropology and as such owes much to the work of earlier
scientists, classically Malinowski, who sought the insider perspective. Such a relationship between the parties, that is between the native, in the indigenous sense, and the investigating anthropologist, in the academic sense, was once well characterised and now caricatured by remarks such as this, attributed to Marshall Salhins who tells a story about the Fijian who said the ethnographer; ‘that’s enough about you, let’s talk about me’ (taken from Marcus, 1994)

However the relationship carried with it some inequities with a constant danger that the power relations would secure rewards, in terms of career, cash and kudos for the researcher only. Gergen (1999: 43) introduces the topic as a way of demonstrating how categorization is always purposeful:

This [problematic] construction of the other has led to acute concern in the field of anthropology, as all too often ethnographic description seems to enhance colonialist attitudes and aspirations. Ethnographic study not only provides the colonial powers information to strengthen their control, but succeeds in characterizing the people in just those ways that would justify such rule.

There was no quick fix to this situation but the efforts of feminist writers in particular highlighted the problem and the power relations at play within research were made explicit in work by Oakley (1981). She exposed the links between the language used and the people so described. As Shotter (1993: 22) has it “in the transition from everyday conversation to the forming of discourse – ideological processes working to benefit certain groups over others were, and still are, at play”. This introduces the concept of discourse and its relationship to language is taken up by Hugman (1991: 37):
Discourse is about more than language. Discourse is about the interplay between language and social relationships, in which some groups are able to achieve dominance for their interests in the way in which the world is defined and acted upon. Such groups include not only dominant economic classes, but also men within patriarchy, and white people within the racism of colonial and post-colonial societies, as well as professionals in relation to service users. Language is a central aspect of discourse through which power is reproduced and communicated.

It is worth considering, in the light of these remarks, how the meaning of encounters can be mediated in their presentation as academic text and how indeed the effects of research transform the context of any social interaction. A bit like Laud Humphreys I wanted to watch without getting involved. But of course observation is involvement in itself.

**Extract 2:**

Arrive at 8.05 (i.e 5mins late) I nearly don’t recognise Janis who is in corporate gear. Anyway I find Rich and we get into uniform. Janis checks us out before we go downstairs. It’s like my mum fixing my tie before I go to school. She just needed to pat my head. There’s a mirror on the stairs so that you can check your look. There’s little notes everywhere about smiling and saying please and thank you. It might not be the Western Pacific but I am an argonaut nevertheless, about to enter a new world; the world of TSWMRN.

We’re on bread and milk all day, basically. Some bloke called Barry is in charge. I’m not clear if Barry is aware of my status. He treats me dead straight anyway. We stack the bread shelves. Rich knows what he’s about and we are left to get on with it. Moving the trolley between aisles Rich jokes that Barry calls him ‘dangerous’ but the joke is that Rich really wants to be called ‘lethal’. He tells customers to “mind your legs!”, or “watch your ankles!”. At one point he clips a display of breakfast cereal but nothing more serious or dangerous or lethal than that.
Rich decides when we break (at 10.30) he calls it ‘his break’. He says it’s late
and when I ask why he says he prefers it that way since it makes the day pass
quicker.
[fried egg, beans on toast and coffee for 75p. a bargain. If you smile at the
blonde girl, supposing the blonde’s on that day, you get extra beans. Honest, it
works.]
I read the slogans that are in the cafeteria:

‘It’s nice to be important. It’s more important to be nice’.

And

‘you never get the second chance to make a first impression’.

I wonder if they’ve got copyright on these or if they found them in a Xmas cracker.
Again on the stairs, on the way down I see that there’s a note to all cashiers; it’s
the message for the month…they have to smile and say hello. What’s next
month’s going to be, I wonder? Scowl? Tell people to piss off?!
On the shelves people ask me questions. Where’s the sugar? Where’s the
golden fry? (What’s golden fry? I’ve never heard of ‘golden fry’. The kid asking is
about ten and has a note (?from their mum). I wonder if this is integral to their
meal. Will he be in trouble if he goes home without the golden fry? Why isn’t he at
school anyway? Is this a wind-up, a sort of initiation ceremony for the hordes of
postgrads they get stacking shelves? Will they be chuckling about this at the
Xmas night out?
“Hey, Baz, remember that university kid we had here, couldn’t find the Golden
Fry?”
“Yeah, ha, ha, probably still looking for it now!”
But it’s real enough. He shows me the note. I feel uncomfortable, like I shouldn’t
ask where the milk is? We never did find the Golden Fry.
Questions keep coming. Where’s the vinegar? Is that still on offer? They don’t
distinguish between me and Rich; they just see a punter in a TSWMRN outfit and
ask. The guy who couldn’t find the sugar was very disappointed.
I’m not sure how to react. I want to say “Frozen peas?! Why are you asking me?
I’m an undercover social scientist doing participant observation as part of a
Rich calls everybody ‘pal’ and tries to flirt with the women.

“I’ll talk to anybody, me,” he says.

At one point in the day he meets somebody he knows; if this bloke’s not a service-user then I’m employee-of-the-month. He’s with his mum(??). They chat. The bloke smiles at me and holds his thumb up.

“Allright?”, he says, twice.

He and Rich are obviously old buddies.

[later, at knocking off time, I bump into Al from football, from years back. The first thing I tell him is I don’t work there. Why’s that?? He tells me his wife does; she’s on the checkout. Own goal or what?]

As we go around the warehouse area Rich has a ‘call’ he likes to make (and only within this area; i.e. away from the public; some sort of animal/ jungle cry). He kids on with some of the guys who joke back. It all appears very matey.

The music is continuous. A tape. I never heard a repeat all day. Never heard a repeat in all the time I was there. It’s interrupted only by staff calls; bing bong; “Will Mr. Right come to customer services, bing bong, telephone call for so-and-so.” Rich seems to know most of the tunes, whether from repetition or first hand I don’t know. I suspect first hand. He sings stacking bread. Some customers encourage him. Nobody is detrimental. Is it me or is it this end of town?

[end of extract]

In these interactions my buddy was the expert and I was the novice. This made me reflect on the writings of Schutz, in particular. In common with Geertz he saw meaningfulness as the proper subject matter for the social sciences. His phenomenological background is in contrast to Durkheim and Parsons, for example, who looked at social facts. Science, apparently, looks for laws; interpretation looks for meaning. So while the rest of the world shopped for edible material I shopped for meaning in social encounters.

Schutz suggested a three-tier, stereotypical device we might use to comprehend the differing degrees of intimacy within a social setting; the person...
on the street, the cartographer and the stranger. He drew on his own experiences as a refugee in New York where he had to acquire a quick working knowledge of the social system in order to survive. The varying levels of detachment mirror the situation the researcher can find themselves in when they take up fieldwork. On day one I was the stranger in town with aspirations to be the street. From there I had to construct my own epistemological standpoint. This turned out to have two centres: the bread aisle and the milk fridge.

Before we continue I’d just like you all to consider for a moment which two products you imagine might be the most popular purchases with supermarket shoppers. And remember in TSWMRN the off-licence is a separate to the main emporium.

Done that? Yes, the answer’s bread and milk. I’ll give you an example of a typical shift on the fresh foods section, special areas of responsibility; bread and milk. Arrive at work. Get changed. Clock in. (Yes, the instructions are to be in uniform before clocking-in). Check mirror. Look for new signs aimed specifically at shelf-stackers - “This month all shelf-stackers should nod enthusiastically at customers before ignoring them completely” (OK, I made that bit up, there was nothing about enthusiasm). Go onto shop floor, move through to storage area. Bring trays of bread to bread aisle. Rotate stock. Stack shelves. Go to dairy fridge. Rotate stock. Stack shelves. Thaw out on bread aisle. Sort shelves out. Return to dairy fridge. Stack shelves. Thaw out in canteen. Return to shop floor. And so it went on. And on. And on.

**Extract 3:**

Milk and bread. Seems quieter today. Barry isn’t there, it’s a woman who when she says hello to Rich turns to me and says, ‘I don’t know you’ so I tell her she can call me Al. Later in the canteen I sense the boss, Steve, wondering the same but he doesn’t say anything so I don’t.

There’s another trolley crash. He’s pulling the hydraulic jack behind him, the sort you might see in a vehicle-repair workshop, and it collided with a woman’s shopping trolley. No damage. Just as well. That thing could break your ankle and some of the old dears in the shop, old and frail, can hardly carry their baskets,
never mind contend with a hydraulic jack…..the contents of some people’s shopping baskets just look so pathetic, I can imagine their kitchens….I feel like I can see into their lives. Rich apologised very briefly and perfunctorily and then when we were backstage he complained that people just got in the way.
The music is even more insistent than I remember it. Except now it’s interrupted by adverts. They’ve got a series of ads for Xmas bargains which culminates in crowds cheering. Rich joins in. After a while I join in.

Other than that it’s milk and bread, bread and milk. We rotate the stock. Rich is very imaginative about piling it onto the shelves. He decides to move a whole section of milk rolls down towards the breakfast breads. “We can get the rest of the stay fresh stuff on here now,” he says. I can sense a punch-line in the offing. “Hey, we know what we’re doing.” (I’m pathetically pleased with the reference to we). I sling more trays down the aisle. “Yeah, we know what we’re doing. This is using your loaf. Hey, using your loaf, geddit Alex, I said I’m using my loaf.” A mother and child combo are buying bread. They get the joke. Rich tells them again anyway. “I said, I’m using my loaf.” The woman smiles but she’s smiling at me and it looks like a plea for help. I don’t want to be part of this conspiracy. But I smile back anyway.

“Should we look at that milk again?”, I ask him when the bread is as neat as it gets.

“The milk? We’re the Milky Bar kids, us. Hey, the milk”. We make our way to the dairy fridge. Rich has a word for everybody. “Alright, luv?” “Them’s nice. Had one for my tea last week”.

[end of extract]

At one point I had to stop. Maybe it was the unaccustomed movements, the apron tied around my waist; I readjusted my trousers only to discover that it was my notebook and pen which I had tucked into the back of my strides which was causing the problem. I had completely forgotten about them. I was supposed to be taking notes. But of what? Bread and milk? After a few days I was beginning to think that instead of learning about meaning and identity and the social
construction of disability I was instead learning to become a more productive and efficient shelf-stacker, a better employee. And still no staff discount.

The life of the ethnographer was becoming problematic. Back in the sanctuary of the office I returned to the texts for comfort. I need some questions answering. Where was all this rich data I had been promised? And what was that about ‘thick description’ when all I had was ‘own brand’ thick sliced bread? How was I going to answer the question posed by Angrosino (1992: 175) when, speaking of people with learning difficulties, he asked: “How do people who are otherwise inarticulate about themselves get others to understand who they are?” After all, that what I was trying to do, surely.

Maybe participant observation (just one method of doing ethnography) is weak because of the reactive effect (the observer affecting the experiment). I couldn’t be entirely sure that my presence wasn’t having an effect on my buddy’s performance on the shop floor. Was my presence, for example, inhibiting other shelf-stackers from approaching my buddy as they might do in the normal run of events. In the canteen, for example, we would sit together. The tables were small enough for this to preclude anyone from joining us. What went on when I wasn’t there?

It certainly didn’t stop the supervisor giving us work. I discounted Rich saying and doing things just to make an impression on me but even so, my other efforts at data collection with other members of the group in other surroundings were similarly stymied. Somehow I was missing the point. I resolved to absorb everything. I became a sponge, a magnet, a data-monster.

**Extract 4:**

Rich starts off telling me he’s been depressed (he also started at 8 am after telling me it was a 9 o’clock start but so what?) and he looks a bit tired. Who wouldn’t?

Straight on to the bread. Keeley is supervisor. She remarks that he’s not on the same planet today.

We take some stuff to the bakery. One of the women asks him if he’s going to the Xmas do. “I’ll gie ye a dance if you go”, she says. This sounds more like a
warning than an invitation. I don’t get the impression Rich is even thinking of going. I just hope she doesn’t ask me.

Meanwhile, back at the bread counter, Warburton’s haven’t delivered and it’s 10.30am. Pandemonium. You’d think there was a national food shortage, a famine even. Customers are lurking around the aisles. There’s no room to move. Some people are even contemplating the croissants but this isn’t a croissant part of town. One of the stackers comes out of the back and speaks to Keeley the supervisor. Apparently the delivery is being unloaded even as we speak. Word gets out and there’s a surge. It reminds me of a football crowd. Rich keeps up his banter. “I like that one toasted, me. Yeah, the wholemeal’s still on offer. Yeah, BOGOF, good one that. Go on, BOGOF”. Then the bread starts to arrive on palettes. Utter chaos. A feeding frenzy. There’s hardly any need to stack the shelves, the bread disappears off the palettes before we can stack it. By the time that’s sorted there’s hardly any milk left. By the time that’s done it’s nearly home time. It’s a wonderful life.

I volunteer to come in for a day nearer Xmas and Janis seems enthusiastic. “We could do with an extra pair of hands,” she says. I leave it that she’ll get in touch.

The solution I am leaning towards currently as I struggle with ethnography is that it ‘s all a matter representation. In trying to represent, that is to represent someone else’s interpretation of their situation, am I falling for the trap sprung by Denzin (1997: 265) when he spoke about the failure of ocular epistemology (defined as mimetic) to produce only information and knowledge but not understanding?

Let me try to explain (although in doing so I should refer you to Rorty (1980: 170-171) whose work is influential here). The goal of philosophy can be equated to the search after ‘truth’, viewed as correspondence, or ‘knowledge’, seen as accuracy of representation. This position is summarised by analytic and synthetic statements which take as their justification, appeals to either language or experience. Vygotsky dismisses this when he says that “the structure of speech does not simply mirror the structure of thought; that is why words cannot be put on by thought like a ready-made garment” (1986: 219).
Rorty (1980: 171) too discards as unhelpful this reductionist distinction which tries to align words with objects, preferring to see knowledge as “a matter of conversation and social practice”. Shotter (1993: 29) also alludes to this when he says, *a propos* of foundational certainties, “Our daily lives are not based on any such certainties” but instead on “oral encounter and reciprocal speech”. This line of thought had me worried. It was just as Shotter (1993: 12) again, had indicated, when he said “many who endorse a social constructionist theory of social processes, still wish to endorse a ‘realist’ methodology.”

Now, at the beginning of this article some of you may remember my reference to narrative and it is in narrative that I think I may have found a solution. An article by Somers (1994: 606) contains these lines. They were clearly written with me in mind.

While the older interpretation of narrative was limited to that of a representational form, the new approaches define narrative and narrativity as concepts of *social epistemology* and *social ontology*. These concepts posit that it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities. [original emphasis]

On reading these lines I felt as if I had been saved. But how I adopted this approach and worked it into the research well, that’s another story, for another day.

But just two more things before I close. One, a thought, the other by way of a postscript. I want to leave you with a thought about some of the litter we might leave behind as social scientists. I may be atypical in as much as I actually enjoy supermarket shopping but my experiences in TSWMRN have made me bok differently at the workers in the supermarkets I regularly patronise. The experience has also led me to re-think the research relationship as it exists between researchers and the people they research. As supermarket customers we arrive in our cars, we fill our bags, flash our plastic and then we drive away.
Research can feel a bit like that too. Sometimes it makes me wonder if research might be the new shopping. Kincaid (1988: 18-19) puts it this way.

That the native does not like the tourist is not hard to explain. For every native of every place is a potential tourist, and every tourist is a native of somewhere. Every native everywhere lives a life of overwhelming and crushing banality and boredom and desperation and depression, and every deed, good and bad, is an attempt to forget this. Every native would like to find a way out, every native would like a rest, every native would like a tour. But some natives – most natives in the world – cannot go anywhere. They are too poor. They are too poor to go anywhere. They are too poor to escape the reality of their lives; and they are too poor to live properly in the place where they live, which is the very place you, the tourist, want to go – so when the natives see you, the tourist, they envy you, they envy your ability to leave your own banality and boredom, they envy your ability to turn their own banality and boredom into a source of pleasure for yourself.

**February 2001:**

Xmas and New Year came and went. No word from Janis despite a letter and two phone calls which always seemed to catch her on a day off. I’d seen Rich but only as part of the ongoing interviews for biographical data. He was quieter than usual. He didn’t attend the first group interview because he was late back from work. The manager at the home where he lives told me he’d been keeping a low profile of late and Pat, one of the group, just tutted and shook her head when I enquired about him. “Them”, she says (Rich has a brother there too) “They’re mardy, them”.

I phoned the supermarket yet again to arrange another series of visits. At last Janis came to the phone. I reintroduced myself. “Oh”, she said, sounding slightly startled. “Rich doesn’t work for us anymore”. There was a pause. I was starting to panic. If he doesn’t work there then where’s he going every day? She was probably wondering what to say next. We both started to talk at once. She went on, “He wasn’t enjoying it. He missed a few days…said something about feeling depressed.” Her voice trailed off.
If I had a drawing board I could at least go back to it.

References
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thesis looks at issues of meaning and identity as they apply to people socially constructed as having a "learning difficulty". Too old now to rock 'n' roll (properly) but retaining deceptive speed on the football field (he's slower than he looks) he divides his time between caring for his six year old son, cataloguing his CD collection and polishing his research interest in narrative inquiry as a method of participatory research. Sometimes seen in S8 of an evening with his main squeeze he still cherishes dreams of winning the Shakespeare quiz and seeing the Hibees in Europe.