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## Dancing and Romancing with Infantry: Reflections on an Ethnography

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### Abstract

The literature on ethnographers doing research in dangerous and violent situations has not much to say on the complexity of motives, which propel the latter into such contexts. This paper examines the motives which propelled the author into doing research with the UK infantry including in an operational context. It links these motives to the author's biographical development over decades and examines practices and perceptions which helped sustain those motives when fieldwork became problematic. The paper combines auto-biographical memories (in italics) with field notes made during participant observation with infantry.

### Keywords

Ethnography, Participant observation, Biography, Romance

### Introduction

Research on doing ethnography in violent contexts has a developed literature. This is presently primarily composed of material from social anthropology and sociology (e.g., Avruch 2001; Baird 2018; Fassin 2013; Ferrell and Hamm 1998; Kovats-Bernat 2002; Lee 1995; Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000; Nilan 2002; Nordstrom and Robben 1995; Olujic 1995; Rodgers 2001; Sluka 1990; Swendenburg 1995; Tabuteau-Harrison et al. 2024; Van Maanen 2011). Some of this is in edited collections on "fieldwork", for a review of these, see Baird (2018: 343). Much of this material tends to be focused on the general problems ethnographers encounter in such contexts and possible solutions to the latter. Other parts of this literature are more specific with its focus upon engaging with groups as diverse as Columbian street gangs, urban policing in the West, outright war in Croatia, intermittent conflict in Palestine and the perils of accompanying Nigerian streetwalkers. Some of this material can be considered subcultural ethnography in the classic genre (e.g., Goffman 1976, Whyte 1943/1981).

Interestingly there is another literature connected to the above, which focuses upon researching “voluntary risk” taking in various dangerous activities. This area of study was initially started by Lyng and Snow’s (1986) work on sports parachuting and the development of the concept of ‘edgework’ (Lyng 1990). Initially the concept was applied to “extreme sports”, but now researchers have applied its utility to activities as diverse as search and rescue, crime, drug use, finance, and high-risk occupations such as firefighting and aid work (for useful reviews see Bunn 2017; Kidder 2022; Mellor and Shilling 2021). In this field, identifying motives for taking voluntary risks has been given more emphasis. Thus, certain kinds of individuals are identified as engaging in risky activities, propelled by the ‘seductive’ (Lyng 2005: 5) attraction of risk itself. As well as the attraction of such activities producing ‘heightened sense of self and emotional states...and a greater sense of control over spaces and objects through which things feel “more real”’ (Bunn 2017: 2), compared to routine existence. Thus, the practices of risk can briefly ‘re-enchanted the world’ (Kidder 2022: 189). In addition, if risky activities are completed collectively a perception of membership of ‘an elite group’ (Lyng and Matthews 2007: 79) can emerge.

The above literatures do not, however, exhaust the complexity of possible motives which propel researchers (or the lay public) into making voluntary choices which involve some degree of peril. As Lee (1995: 7) notes: ‘The choices researchers make to study-or to avoid-particular topics are mediated by a variety of personal, aesthetic, theoretical, and ideological factors’, a conclusion with which Mellor and Shilling (2021: 12) agree. Hence, with the latter point in mind, the first aim of this study is to depict something more of the complexity of motivational features present, when completing research in dangerous and violent contexts, thus adding to the literature. The second aim is to portray various difficult instances in which the motives of the author were in danger of disintegrating (and potentially the research in toto) but were sustained by various practices which prevented such a disintegration. These practices being intimately linked to the author’s past biography and his aspirational motive to become a certain kind of changed person, namely an educated one.

## On Conceptualising Motives

Motives in a sociological sense Mills (1940: 905) long ago explained: ‘stand for anticipated situational consequences of questioned conduct. Intention or purpose (stated as a “program”) is awareness of anticipated consequences; motives are names for consequential situations and surrogates for actions leading to them’. Via primary and then secondary socialisation ‘vocabularies of motive’ (Mills 1940: 909) appropriate to particular scenarios of action are internalised. These are typifications (Schutz 1972) which are part of common cultural knowledge generally or sometimes particular to specific social groups such as occupations (Berger and Luckman 1966; Scott and Lyman 1968). Motive talk internally to self or externally to others has a composite function. Firstly, the interpretation of situations and the choosing of forms of action. Secondly, a wider function as part of the management of social interaction. As previously explained the overt motive for the author being with troops in dangerous contexts, was that the data collected amidst them was necessary to complete the ethnography of infantry, which sociologically constituted a realistic assessment. This was the motive I declared publicly both to troops, sociological colleagues and friends and thus helped me manage their querulous and on occasion incredulous interaction. In contrast, the internal motive talk to self was not made public, but was present persistently and consistently, convincing myself that the choice was indeed a necessary one. These motives were intensely subjective and immersed within a particular kind of thought and feelings, namely *romantic*. What follows is a portrayal of those romantic motives and then a depiction of the practices by which I managed to sustain the latter as dangerous and violent incidents occurred.

## Biography, Education and Research Journey

To put the link between the author's biography, education and research concisely, between winter 1961 and spring 1972 he served as an Army Corporal for ten years and forty-six days. Initially possessing no school qualifications, then seven years into that period, he started to study for the latter part-time, by correspondence courses in a long process of getting educated. By 1976 he had acquired a sociology degree which was followed by lots of holiday camp dishwashing! A little later a PhD was begun at Lancaster on the subculture of UK infantry.

Biography and motives are inextricably interlinked. Again, of crucial relevance here is the work of C. Wright Mills (1940, 1959). The axiomatic point of his *Sociological Imagination* (1959) being a depiction of the connection between individual biography and wider historical forces. Or in Mill's words 'the personal troubles of milieu' plus 'the public issues of social structure' (1959: 14). As Mill's further expounded '*Troubles* occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with others', contrastively '*Issues* have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life' (1959: 14-15). As Gane and Back (2012: 404) have noted, Mills viewed the sociological task to be 'to make connections between the two realms. It is to identify the larger social forces that furnish our most intimate personal troubles and to translate the "personal troubles" of biography into "public issues" of history and society'. The author's personal troubles of biography for a very long time was being "uneducated" and the consequent narrowness and limitations of a life which flowed from that condition. So, for example, the first time he ever went to a theatre (in London), he asked for a 'cheap one down the front please love' and got laughed at (albeit rather kindly).

As a PhD student, the author did participant observation with UK infantry for three months during 1979/1980 intending to construct a subcultural ethnography (see, for example, the classics of the genre, Whyte 1943/1981, and Becker, 1963). Initially, this was at a Basic Training Depot for two weeks of 17-hour days with recruits, followed by ten weeks living 24/7 with a Company of a particular operational Battalion. Participant observation was carried out with that unit in the contexts of UK barracks, field exercises in Canada/UK and an operational deployment in South Armagh (Northern Ireland). The latter, whilst the conflict with Irish Republican forces was still happening.

In operational contexts, the attention of "enemy" and the latter's objective to liquidate troops is stark. The conflict in South Armagh was not a scenario in which general war prevailed like recently in Gaza or Ukraine. Rather violence was intermittent, the troops being prey to occasional booby traps, ambushes, sniping, radio-controlled explosive devices, RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) and mortar attacks. Thus, in the first month on operations the Company had two men killed. Danger by accident or by intended violence then permeated the various contexts in which participant observation was done to complete the ethnography. The instrumental and overt motive for choosing the latter method was that it was deemed the best way of gathering data that was deep enough to reveal the complexities of the infantry subculture (on this point, see Lyng 1998: 225, on researching sky diving). Thus, the possibility of peril had to be tolerated. Being in such contexts was a decision not taken lightly as when a Corporal, I had encountered dangerous accidents and armed violence.

## Field Notes, Memories and their Portrayal

The data which is portrayed later in this paper is of three kinds. First, there are field notes made in situ with infantry over three months. These were analysed using the constant comparative method (Charmaz 2006), with the author always looking for social patterns of interaction axiomatic to the subculture. Those patterns were then made sociologically analytic utilising the conceptual and theoretical resources of symbolic interactionism (Rock 2001) and, to a lesser extent, ethnomethodology (Benson and Hughes 1983). Other field notes were made on how the role of ethnographer was managed. The core of doing successful participant observation is the craft of fitting in and not disturbing one's participants' reality. This was the prime imperative of my research process, as failure to do so, particularly in an operational context, could have dire consequences. The latter was articulated to me quite directly:

*I have just had a chat with the platoon Colour Boy (Staff Sergeant). He told me what was expected of me, giving me a full 'eyes on' look and said: 'If you are going to dance (patrol) around with us out there, you need to be switched on (aware) all the time. Otherwise, we will all be in serious trouble'. (Crossmaglen Base, South Armagh).*

The above data sets are conventional ethnography and can be considered 'realist' and 'confessional' tales (Van Maanen, 2011: 45-72, 73-100). The third kind of data is autobiographical, essentially small memories from the author's life, before being educated, during the PhD period (but not when in the field) and after fieldwork. These memories, which are in *italics*, are not ethnography nor auto-ethnography, as they were not collected in situ as participant observation ensued (see Van Maanen 2011: 106-107).

Whilst ethnography is a well-accepted method in sociology, ethnographers' use of intensely personal autobiographical material still raises some methodological eyebrows (Atkinson 2020: 142). That said, it has developed considerably within sociology since its emergence some decades ago (Reed-Danahay 2002; Parsons and Chappel 2020) and as Blanchard (1993: 73) notes: 'On the whole, looking at the body of the ethnographic tradition itself, it becomes clear that since early on, ethnography has inexorably been linked to autobiography and vice versa'. A position with which Coffey (1999: 119/127) concurs: 'All ethnographic writing is to some extent autobiographical'. She adds, 'memory and reminiscence are pivotal to both autobiography and ethnography'. So personal memories are included in what follows, given they were influential in constructing the motives to take risks, and they were also fundamental in the process of new 'identity creation' (Smart 2007: 41). Inevitably, there is a difficult equilibrium to be maintained between 'uncovering the past in as many layers as possible' (McMahon 1991: 29) and reassembling what has happened to fit the present account.

The little italicised memories which are below have been written in a more 'evocative' (Atkinson 2020: 19-20) form being 'more overtly' 'authored', than the field notes on infantry subcultural practices or how the fieldwork role was managed, this form of writing was chosen as it was felt to be the best way of portraying biographical instances propelling the researcher into the contexts previously depicted. 'Realist and evocative writing intertwine' (Atkinson 2020: 19) then. The following combination of memories and field notes constitutes what Coffey (1999: 123) has identified as 'tales of the self', which are 'ways of combining ethnography and autobiography in explicit and self-conscious ways'. The form of writing used to depict the author's small memories in this account constitutes then neither realist nor even confessional tales (Van Maanen 2011: 45-100) but rather perhaps approximate what Van Maanen (2011: 101-124) has categorised as 'impressionist tales'. Albeit none of the evocative depictions took place 'in the field', as Van Maanen (2011: 117) advises. In these little memories, there is a focus on feelings which permeated the author's being at particular junctures, which were influential in the development of motives propelling him into prolonged action to become an "educated person" and changing his biography.

## Theorising and Conceptualising the Data: Symbolic Interactionism, Identity and Transformation

Tales of the self indicate the importance of conceptions of identity for understanding how these were axiomatic in the process of this researcher choosing to take risks in the field. As Stone (1977: 93) has observed, the substantive dimension of self is identity. Works by Blumer (1969), Goffman (1959) and Mead (1934/1962) developed the symbolic interactionist conceptualisation of the latter. From this theoretical position, the individual self is alert and reflective. Thus, people are able to perceive themselves as an object from the position of an outsider. The self then becomes “other” and is assessed via an internal reflecting process. Plus, a “generalised other” is also developed that is constructed by internalising general social attitudes (Blumer 1969; Mead 1934/1962). The individual then becomes aware of the self-in-action. From this stance, the individual has the capacity of understanding oneself as an object understood by others and as a subject understood by the self. The result is that *identity is* constructed by interactional labour between the individual and others. This constitutes a social process which is both dynamic and intersubjective (Mead 1934/1962: 8). Whilst there is a cognitive dimension of self, the core of it is what Goffman (1963: 106) has identified as ‘felt identity’, which he notes ‘is first of all a subjective, reflexive matter that necessarily must be felt by the individual whose identity is at issue’. An individual perception rooted in self-feelings (McCall and Simmons 1978). These self-feelings and the identity they form have the capacity to change when contexts provoke the latter action. So as Strauss (1977: 66) observed ‘transformation’ becomes possible, embracing ‘changes in form-changes in being’, involving ‘new evaluations of self and others, of events, acts and object’. Such changes promote ‘the development of identities’ (Ibid: 78). The desire for the possession of a new identity was fundamental to the development of crucial subjective, and less overt, motives that propelled the author, and these will be portrayed later in the paper.

## Romantic Thought: Connections to Symbolic Interactionism and Myself

In the West, romantic thought has a pedigree developed within the literature in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Halpin 2006; McDermott 1989; Mead 1936; Shalin 1984). Interestingly, one can trace its emergence within social disciplines initially via anthropology during the latter period (Maskens and Blanes 2013; Stocking 1989). Halpin (2006) identifies that this kind of thought has certain idealised salient features: love, heroism and imagination. Love in this kind of thought is not just confined to being directed at an intimate other or others. Rather, love is conceptualised as a desire, a passion to connect to the wider good and beauty of existence, and through the latter to substantiate the total self, or in Halpin’s terms ‘to fill out the missing parts both of oneself and others...’ (Halpin 2006: 332). Heroism involves taking risks in daring ‘to struggle for some form of inner authenticity as the basis for personal imaginative freedom’ (Halpin 2006: 334). Imagination is crucial as it fosters creativity, and as Halpin (2006: 339) notes, it has a cognitive function ‘in our intellectual lives, aiding the development of knowledge and understanding of ourselves, of other people and of the world’. This depiction of a conscious self, which has the insight, desire and ability to change itself as it interacts with others, has a close similarity to Mead’s sociological conception of identity, previously depicted, which underpins symbolic interactionism. Mead (1936) recognised a debt to such romantic antecedents, which Shalin (1984) has explained at length. As Shalin (1984: 38) notes: ‘Mead’s theory as it assumes the continuity of mind, self and society, bears a striking resemblance to romantic social philosophy’. The latter focuses primarily on consciousness and mind, whereas Mead extends that analysis to include more emphasis upon the impact of the social upon identity in a mutually interdependent engagement. I now realise that my motives for doing ethnography in problematic contexts were indeed heavily romantic, although I did not define them in that fashion to myself at the time, albeit they were *felt*. Maskens and Blanes (2013: 247) suggest that romantic motives are firmly

entrenched in personal sensibilities, which, in turn, are impacted upon by beliefs, and exposure to systems of thought.

The development of these emotional sensibilities had a long biographical pedigree going back to my adolescence as wider cultural socialisation (Berger and Luckman 1966) impacted upon my development. Thus, providing me with an affective way of experiencing social life and a predisposition towards a romantic way of being. The latter conforming to the general cultural values in the UK and USA at the time in the 1950's and early 1960's, which was heavily influenced by romantic cinema. Interestingly C. Wright Mills himself has been categorised as a 'romantic' (Miliband 1962: 17) so, arguably, I was in good company.

*I am 14 and 'we' don't have a telly only one in the street. So I am going to the Plaza the local cinema in Newport Docks every chance I get. Spending some (the rest goes to 'Mam') of my wages I get from my after-school groceries delivery boy job. Hollywood meets South Wales, and I am absolutely loving it as it is taking me out of the austerity of 1950's working class Britain. The amazing cars, the Californian sunshine, the vibrant colours and there seems to be no winter. The well-fed people none with the 'we have just ended years of rationing look' which everyone around me still has. The Boy meets Girl sagas which I cannot get enough of (I do not yet have a girlfriend) with their walking into the sunset endings. And the girls, the girls with their fabulous looks, and instantly falling in love with Audrey Hepburn, Jean Seberg, Ingrid Bergman. Then Lauren Bacall- jeezzzz the first time I saw her! In Key Largo, The Big Sleep, and To Have and To Have Not. Inevitably then I am walking the dock-side streets as Humphrey Bogart practicing what I think is a Yank accent...*

*Then still 14 I am in my tiny box bedroom, in the dark, turning the luminous dial of the even then old-fashioned wireless. Suddenly finding the American Forces Network (Europe) station which is playing some kind of music I have never encountered. So there it was love at first hearing and her name was Jazz! Listening to Billie Holliday, Ella Fitzgerald and the wonderful but often overlooked Blossom Dearie, singing the great jazz standards such as 'Love is here to Stay', 'There will Never Be Another You', 'I Thought about You', 'All of You', 'Embraceable You' and on and on into the nights, and years...*

So, the development of the 'romantic me' began early. Therefore, at this juncture, romance, its interaction with the development of my identity and doing dangerous participant observation needs some scrutiny.

## **The Biographical Journey: The Romance of Education**

At 15 I left school with no qualifications and started doing unskilled work in the railway freight marshalling yards of Newport (South Wales) docks. This was not surprising to me as the rest of my family had all gone to work at that age, there was an inevitability and normality to it. None of my family had gained school qualifications; there was the very rare completion of an apprenticeship by males, but that was the limit of such learning endeavour. Plus, a gendered division to such work existed. Males engaged mainly in unskilled labour, and females worked mostly in shops. The following year I joined the UK Army for just over a decade, "rising" to the rank of Corporal, which is two ranks off the bottom of the organisational structure. My perceptions of self during much of this time, were that I was uneducated or, to put it bluntly, I was "thick".

I accepted this perception and was not unhappy with it. Then, whilst working night shifts in a large NATO COMCEN (communications centre) in Belgium with a United States Air Force Sergeant, doing a part-time degree in politics, we found ourselves habitually discussing political issues when telemetry was slow. Subsequently, I got told repeatedly by him that I was not “thick”. He then persistently nagged me to “sit-in” with him on a soon-to-start afternoon course on international politics run on Base for American students by the University of Maryland. The civilian course tutor agreed (course numbers were low). Plus, I was told that if I also did the written-work I would be unofficially informed if I would have passed the course or not. Unsurprisingly, I thought I was bound to fail, but at least it would keep ‘Jim’ off my back at 3.am! Some months later, I was told I would have passed the course if I had been an American student, to Jim’s glee and my consternation. The latter was followed by some weeks of thinking ‘it’s a fluke’ and ‘that tutor is just being kind to me’. Then suddenly, one late afternoon, the proverbial light bulb moment, with the thoughts that I had just passed a second-year University course, so maybe I could get some school qualifications. Years of doing correspondence courses followed as I soldiered on in various countries and eventually gained four ‘O’ levels. At that point, I was back serving in the UK in a Parachute Brigade and had started studying ‘A’ level history in the same way. After work, study was more taxing at this juncture as that army formation was particularly physically intense in its activities; hence falling asleep over textbooks became habitual! During this time, I learnt that if I got two ‘A’ levels, I could perhaps go to university, but I was at a loss at what to study as none of the other subjects I perused excited me. Then, one Saturday afternoon in a local bookshop, by chance, I came upon a sociology primer (Cotgrove 1967) and Boom! The latter pointed out the social features that surrounded me and impacted my life chances. I had never encountered anything like it before and was enraptured. Hence, I immediately began another ‘A’ level correspondence course in sociology. At this juncture, I was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the narrowness of military life and was beginning to display behaviour at odds with its formal and informal cannons. Putting up a big poster of a black and white photograph of Karl Marx next to one’s barrack room bed is bound to bring down ‘trouble’ in a military formation, which had a reputation for being hard-nosed. Thus, both myself and those in command of me realised it was time for me to depart military life, and very quickly, I received permission to purchase my discharge, which took all my savings at the time. More unskilled labour followed, primarily working in the kitchens of holiday camps. Then, wonderfully off to Lancaster University to be a sociology undergraduate at age 27 and learn how to talk to middle-class girls...

The undergraduate degree was gained, followed by another year of scraping a living (again dishwashing) while trying to get funding to do a PhD. Then, at last, a Social Science Research Council scholarship was granted to me back at Lancaster. I was, of course, by this point completely in love with the sociological ‘system of thought’ (Maskens and Blanes 2013: 247) and the thrill of encountering its ‘ideas’, as I already had via Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Mead (interestingly my initial female ‘stars’ were in anthropology: Ruth Benedict, Mary Douglas and Margaret Mead). Then suddenly, who the hell are these guys called Simmel, Schutz and Garfinkel? I had then a ‘romantic love complex’ (Rusu 2018: 14) with sociology, not surprisingly as it had and still was changing my life for the better.

*The Boss Man -John Hughes has just told me about a new wunnerful book by Paul Filmer and other boys called New Directions in Sociological Theory, with stuff on ethnomethodology and sociological phenomenology in it. Uni bookshop has not got it. So as I am off to the Big Shit City London to see distance running mates, I figure Foyle’s book shop down there will have it. I buy it there and fervently flick through its pages. Then Bang! Shit my right elbow is really hurting. I am on the floor and a female voice is asking if I am ‘all right?’. I look up and realise I have mistakenly started to walk up the downside of the Foyle’s escalator. That’s where sociology can get ya...*

I perceived myself on a journey which hopefully would see me become what I conceptualised as an “educated person”. That was what the possession of a PhD symbolised to me; other possible outcomes, such as the status of being a ‘Dr’ or, in theory, the capacity to earn more money, or to start academic employment, were on the very far periphery of my consciousness, if at all. So as the journey from barrack-room to PhD student proceeded, what was crucial was the development of an imaginative capacity to see the possibility of becoming educated. That capacity being essentially a romantic one, within which the possession of a developing sociological imagination (Mills 1959) uncovered connections between me and wider social forces impacting upon me, the latter which for years had been hidden from me. This analytic insight being one which the original literary romantics had also identified as Bowra (1961:221) notes: ‘The Romantics ...agreed that their task was to find through the imagination some transcendental order which explains the world of appearances and accounts...’. Halpin (2006: 342) has identified the relationship between romance and education generally, and particularly the crucial feature of “hope” in that relationship. As he notes: ‘Romanticism is the mood in which we feel we are or could become greater than we know. As such, because it is an exalting and exulting of the imagination, it is a necessary condition for being hopeful in and utopian about education...’. As the romantic screen idol I most adored during my adolescence - Lauren Bacall (2006: 2) put it: ‘Imagination is the highest kite that can fly’. The desire to become an educated person then constituted the central motive propelling my sociological endeavours, and I could, at last, envisage that becoming a possibility as I started PhD study. My educational journey was then permeated by romantic feelings and aspirations to change the self, as I was becoming ‘someone who abandons his previously established life after a transformative experience to pursue a quest, an ideal’ (Maskens and Blanes 2013: 250). However, as the process of gaining a PhD scholarship and then the actual research process itself ensued, other motives emerged which provided further reasons for tolerating dangerous fieldwork contexts.

## **Analysing the Biographical Past and “Digging” Chicago**

As I became aware of the spectrum of sociological knowledge as an undergraduate, I engaged with the writing of Goffman, particularly his work (1976) on ‘total institutions’. This reading invoked not just a cognitive response but also an emotional one, as I could feel how the experiences of my past military biography connected to his conceptual framework. This invoked a strong motive to understand sociologically how I had been militarised and how I had been made to accept the use of armed violence particularly. In theory, I could have chosen any number of topics for my doctoral research, but I chose to go back and try and understand my former life with sociological tools. So, whilst there was the romantic going forward motive of becoming educated, there was also the romantic looking back motive in an attempt, once more in Halpin’s terms (2006: 332) ‘to fill out the missing parts’ of myself. The potential possession of such an enhanced understanding of my biography I perceived to be worth taking risks for. The latter process becoming, for me, an integral part of the ‘quest’ (Maskens and Blanes 2013: 250).

In addition, during the initial preparatory year of PhD study prior to fieldwork, other things were happening, eventually resulting in the construction of another motive, helping me tolerate what infantry call the “sharp end”. During that year, I delved heavily into not just symbolic interactionism but also ethnographies indebted to its theoretical framework. There was an immediate wow! As I avidly read across the spectrum of Chicago School urban ethnographies (e.g., Anderson 1923/1975; Becker 1963; Cressey 1932; Humphreys 1970; Liebow 1967; Polsky 1969; Sutherland 1937; Whyte 1943/1981). This then was “how” I was going to analytically comprehend the complexity of the infantry subculture. In effect, I became enchanted by the myth of the ‘Lone Ethnographer’ (Denzin and Lincoln 1994:200) going into the sociologically unknown, potentially dangerous, ‘dark parts’ of Chicago (for an overview of Chicago ethnography, see Deegan 2002). As Becker (1999: 8) noted of his own motives for engaging in that kind of urban ethnography, experiencing the romance of it all was one of them. That form of Chicago



ethnography being endowed with romanticism via the work of Mead and later Blumer (Gouldner 1973: 348). I was going into a different environment, but it harboured the aforementioned problematic kind of features. So, I aimed to cut the action and endure the *rite de passage* (Parry, Atkinson and Delamont 1994: 46) so as to become a Chicago School ethnographer. That was what I wanted to become. At the time of the research, I had not even been to the USA, let alone Chicago and had never met a Chicago School ethnographer, I was therefore constructing an 'imagined community' (Anderson 2006) for myself. As Anderson (2006: 5) has noted once direct interaction is moved beyond, all communities are the result of imaginary work. Thus, I was heavily "digging" Chicago and aspired to inhabit that identity, which I perceived required taking risks.

Having portrayed something of the complexity of the motives that I developed, and which propelled me into dangerous and violent contexts with infantry. The narrative now turns to the practices I engaged in when encountering the reality of those contexts. Practices I utilised to sustain the affective climate of personal romance in the face of that disturbing reality.

## Working Hard to Sustain Romance

Within an hour of commencing three months of participant observation, rich, deep, interaction was before me. Hence, I immediately realised that if I completed the fieldwork effectively an ethnography was possible and in turn possession of a PhD and becoming an educated person. This romantic vision then needed to be sustained as problematic events happened which threatened to make that vision crumble. This was achieved by accomplishing particular practices. Practice-based theory (Hui et al. 2017) posits that social life is made up of webs of interlinked embodied practices. These can be shared and thus are potentially social, but they also can be individual. My individual practises were of two types, firstly talking to self both in thoughts and speech. Secondly, a combination of said talking and a haptic practice. These were not shared with my research participants. The talks to self were in Turner's (1974) terms 'performative utterances', in as much as they performed the function of sustaining the romantic hope that I would finish my research successfully with the previously mentioned positive consequences. Viewed from decades after their being uttered, I can now see a biographical inevitability about where such sustaining utterances originated, and that was from within the land of Jazz! So, the utterances below in the jazz world are correlated with the condition of being 'hip' which is the opposite of being "square" as the wonderful Blossom Dearie (n.d) has noted. Being in the latter state, one is untogether, and in the former, one has one's act together and can cope with events with style.

Three examples of my field notes from the periods of participant observation follow, the first in which accidental danger occurs. The second was where I made a serious mistake by not "dancing" properly, which elevated the possibility of armed violence occurring. The third in which such violence happened.

*My covered in crap hands slip and I fall awkwardly off the top of the big, high, recruits' assault course wall. Rather than landing on my feet I hit muddy ground with left arm, shoulder and hip. Fuck! Rolling onto my feet I check the body as I run towards the next obstacle. I am hurting but it's not stopping my progress, and I mutter I'm cool, I'm cool, as my superior distance running fitness in big boots, allows me to catch the younger recruits who have negotiated the obstacles better than me. I'm smiling and muttering, because I have caught them up and because I have gotten away with the fall, I'm cool, I'm cool... (Recruit Basic Training Depot, North)*

*Today I made a real mistake...I got the spacing wrong between me and the next lad. So by not being aware enough ('switched off') I placed him and myself in more immediate jeopardy. It's a classic two for the price of one shoot for any PIRA player.*

*The lad gave me a real bollocking out there and back here (Base) quite justifiably. Serious shit. Be cool now, don't lose it, sort your head out, be cool. (Patrol/Base South Armagh).*

*An RCD (explosive radio -controlled device) has just gone off hitting the patrol. One lad has been terribly burnt and I am kneeling down next to him, looking on impotently as medics stick in lines for blood, morphine and god knows what. I hear the radio traffic and a chopper (helicopter) is on its way to extract him. I have got the mantra going, be cool, be cool, I'm cool. (Patrol/Base South Armagh)*

The last instance made it extremely difficult for me to continue to feel my research enterprise was a romantic endeavour. There were countervailing perceptions of myself as a parasitic voyeur upon the troops' reality, accompanied by an overwhelming sadness. Perhaps not a reasoned judgment, but I struggled with it and managed eventually to perceive the awfulness of the incident as being something that would make my completion of becoming educated -the romance- even more fundamental and worthwhile.

The second kind of sustaining romance practice I performed was a combination of utterances and tactile movements with an object. Mead (1934/1962: 77-78) has pointed out that we engage in interaction with objects which generate important meanings for us. That interaction is perhaps most fundamental via touch the latter being initially developed as infants. During the field research, I took only one sociological book with me which was Becker's (1977) classic *Sociological Work*. I avidly read it before fieldwork and afterwards, but I never read it during the periods of participant observation. This was due to the overwhelmingly physical nature of the fieldwork, which made reading mostly impossible, plus the 24/7 presence of data, which demanded field notes be made as a priority all my awake time. Its title mirrored my ongoing endeavours, and so the book became a symbolic and iconic object to me, which I interacted with via voice and hands.

*I have noticed I have been doing something repetitively during any spare moments within the Base. I have been holding Becker's book and mumbling quietly, it must be the latter otherwise the lads will notice and take the piss! So I mumble 'I'll finish, I'll finish, I'll finish! I will finish my sociological work and thus not end up in a body bag down here. Convincing myself I guess. Simultaneously I am smoothing, or I guess caressing the book with my hands endlessly. Pretty weird John boy! (Crossmaglen Base, South Armagh)*

At the time (still so), Becker was my favourite Chicago School sociologist, whose writing I found stimulating and helpful to my studies. Also, when he was young in the 1950's and studying to be a sociologist, he was a part-time jazz pianist (see his photo at Faulkner and Becker 2009, 3) and looked somewhat like my favourite jazz pianist, Bill Evans. So, Becker and his book connected strongly with me not just intellectually but also emotionally, hence its affective attachment to me. Now I recognise the constant touching of the book was also to do with my feeling that I would somehow imbibe its knowledge and skills via such caressing. Nothing objective about that practice!

My encountering the dangerous occurrences just previously depicted when doing participant observation was not perceived by me to be particularly "heroic". I had, after all, completed ten years of army service in which unpleasant things had happened. In addition, I was also a lifelong serious distance runner (still am). These joint-experiences had built a fundamental physical capacity to endure and a psychological predisposition to do so. Thus, to keep going in the face of different kinds of adversity was by then my first nature, so to speak; it was fundamentally axiomatic to my existence.

## Lucky in Love

My sustaining the dream of surviving my fieldwork, finishing my PhD and thus becoming educated was also helped by another feature. I was effectively in love with sociology and: 'One of the romantic myths is that a person is either lucky or unlucky in love' (Bowman 1949: 626). Sauder (2020: 195) defines luck as an 'event or occurrence...that involves chance, is consequential (either beneficial or harmful), and is at least partially out-side the control of the person or people affected by it'. I perceived myself as harbouring some degree of luck. I had, after all, changed my life and was in the process of changing it further. If I had not met "Jim" in Belgium that educational journey would never have happened, how lucky! Additionally, this perception was reinforced by me having survived unharmed various dangerous incidents during my own army service. These ranged from being in the back of a big truck as it rolled over and over down a steep hill in Cornwall, with large ammunition boxes and weapons whizzing just past my head. To me making a faulty parachute exit from an aircraft in Cyprus, with consequently a malfunctioning parachute. Thereby hanging up-side-down by one leg from it as the ground rapidly approached. Until moments before hitting the latter my leg luckily became free, allowing me to adopt a safe landing position. However, the closest to total jeopardy and most violent of these incidents was an IRA attack in Hampshire:

*I am looking across a little road at a vehicle which is changing shape. My mind goes into hyper drive, my thoughts 'it's a hit, get on the ground now! '. I turn to the right dropping that shoulder to the ground, turning my face away and am a third of the way down, when the explosive in the vehicle fully detonates. I am hit down hard by the blast. There is a silence, and I blink rapidly wondering how I am. I move and there is a crunchy, tinkle, tinkle sound, as I realize I am covered in big pieces of shattered glass each with a jagged edge. Training kicks in and I am alert for any possible follow up action. No shooting so good. I roll over and cautiously up with more tinkling moving the bits of my body. Running my hands over me, to find everything seems to be ok. I touch my neck on my right side and find some blood on my fingers. I do it again and no more blood. Just a tiny cut in an area where there are arteries. One lucky boy as there are dead and injured.*

My perception at that time of the above incidents of me being fortuitous was not just individual, as it was located in a wider army subcultural perception of luck operating, as a 'social phenomena' (Sauder, 2020: 195). A collective perception I also found to be present amongst the infantry I later did participant observation with (author). So, perceiving I was lucky helped sustain a personal optimism in the face of danger and violence, fostering a belief that I would become "educated", a real sociologist and a Chicago ethnographer. Convincing myself that I would become a different kind of person:

*I have finished the field work, flying out of Belfast late, scoffing chocolate to celebrate! Into Manchester and then trains to Wales rapidly as the sister is literally right now having her first baby down there. Sure says the railway guy you can get there tonight. No way Jose – I get stuck at Bristol Temple Meads station; the last train has gone. So it's a night on my own-some in an old-time waiting room until the early morning train into God's Country. I smile all night to myself and at the rather elegant old brown wood surrounds. Nothing is going to stop me now walking into that sunset. I have got all the data I need and writing it up, is not going to get me 'slotted' to use the infantry phrase is it! I sit there singing quietly – too knackered to sing loud-The Best is yet to Come, as I've just recently bought a Sinatra and Basie Big Band LP, and I have been a bit obsessed by that track of late. Smile, smile, smile as I can't now believe I have gotten away with it...*

Ever since then, when at T.M I have always gone and sat and smiled in that waiting room, even sometimes only for five minutes in between trains.

## Concluding Thoughts

What has been depicted above is a particular kind of journey involving large educational change for the author and considerable sociological endeavour. Biography and motives, motives and biography interacting as C. Wright Mills (1940, 1959) long ago acutely and helpfully portrayed. Trying to be analytic about my “romantic self”, the wider cultural processes building that self at a particular times and places are evident: cinema, jazz and then later, here comes Sociology wow! Suddenly I am heavily “digging” Chicago ethnographers, and the motive for wanting to be one was similar to Becker (1998: 8), namely experiencing the romance of being an ethnographer, albeit a long way from Chicago. However, it was not just romance as my experience as a soldier had taught me something about the complexity of the ordinary soldier’s subculture. Thus, by the time I became a PhD student I was fully aware that participant observation was the only realistic method that would allow me to analytically understand and portray that complexity. Survey research or documentary analysis were nowhere near the mark, to use a military expression ‘not by a thousand-yard stare’.

Various researchers have pointed out the complexity of features coming together to construct motives which propel ethnographers into dangerous and violent scenarios (Lee 1995: 7; Mellor and Shilling 2021: 12). A complexity that presently has not been given enough attention in the relevant literatures. In addition, the relationship between biography, motives and practices in such problematic contexts has also not attracted enough analytic scrutiny. This paper has attempted to portray something of the above features which were present during the field work of a particular ethnography and thus contributes to what is known about such social processes. In a fundamental sense, as Maskens and Blanes (2013:260) have pointed out: ‘Fieldwork leads to transformations of the self of the ethnographer’. This was certainly the case with the author as his conception of identity was radically changed upon the completion of his three months participant observation. By going in and then getting safely out of dangerous and violent contexts with rich, complex data on the infantry subculture, in his mind’s eye he had been the ‘Lone Ethnographer’ (Denzin and Lincoln 1994:200). Successfully enduring the *rite de passage* (Parry, et al. 1994: 46) to become an imagined member of the Chicago School. That completion was perceived as the most important act in the journey of becoming “educated”, as the writing up of the PhD, was much less difficult than the fieldwork and depended upon the latter’s data. Ultimately, the climate of romance which pervaded that educational journey was saturated by intensely personal ‘idealizations, and utopias’ (Maskens and Blanes 2013: 254/260), about being educated and sociology ‘stars’, together with similar perceptions about University life generally. A set of beliefs and feelings perhaps only possible once for any researcher, before the acquiring of ‘cynical knowledge’ about such processes, individuals and organisations is perhaps, over time, inevitably accrued (Gouldner et al. 1977).

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