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Contextual Observational Exercise

For my contextual observational exercise, I had made arrangements to shadow a professional dog trainer as she held an initial consultation and first training session for a fear-reactive dog. The observations took place in two sessions, the first being two hours and the second an hour and a half. Both sessions took place at the client's house, as that is where they needed the most help as their dog was primarily reactive towards other people and dogs in their neighborhood. During both of these sessions, I took note of both the trainer and the client. I noted how the trainer relayed information, what they chose to share, how they worded their information and how much attention they paid to their client as they spoke. I also paid attention to the client, how they seemed to take in the information, what questions they had, how they responded to what was said, etc.

Throughout the training sessions, I noted the techniques the trainer used, mainly treats and praise. When you are working with animals it is essential to be flexible. While my observations went as planned, parts of the training session itself did not. Animals are living creatures with their own complex emotions. Due to this they may do things that you do not plan or foresee occurring. The trainer did have to adjust some parts of the training session in the moment in order to account for some challenges we encountered that were a bit too overwhelming for the pet and the client.

Overall, my initial conclusions of my contextual observations were that professional training requires a lot of adjustment and flexibility. This experience highlights how a professional differs from a first-time trainer or average pet owner as I noted it was much more difficult for the client to notice certain things about their pet and adjust accordingly. They needed quite a bit of help from the professional trainer.

During my contextual observations I did use a few methods while observing. The first was simply note taking. During the initial consultation I was able to write things down as it was not strange for me to be taking notes in that specific context. The trainer was also taking notes themselves. This allowed me to write down and ask questions of the trainer after the consultation without the client present. I was able to hold brief interviews after both the consultation and the initial training session. During the initial training session, I did have to rely on memory when taking notes, as I was helping handle dogs and was unable to write down my observations in the moment. Utilizing these methods, I was able to learn a lot about the process of dog training from a professional standpoint. Mainly how a trainer relays the intricacies of dog psychology to an average pet owner in a way that is easily understood.

When presenting results to a client, there are a few key ideas I would like to emphasize. The first being a professional dog trainer, above all else, must be adaptable. Training sessions are never, and I repeat, never, going to go one hundred percent as planned. It is crucial to be able to adapt to both your clients' needs as well as the needs of their pet in a given situation. It is also important to realize that dog training is an ongoing process. There are new developments in what we know about dog psychology every day. It is important as a trainer to keep on top of the latest research and be able to communicate that to your clients. In addition to this dog training does not occur overnight. While I saw progress in the clients pet's behavior from the initial consultation to

the first session, it is imperative that a dog owner keeps up with the training and realizes that there is no quick fix. It takes time and consistency to get behavior that you want.

Reflecting on week three's readings, I focused a lot on some points from chapter twelve in *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. First I focused on what my role might be during these observations. For this exercise I felt it would be beneficial to take on the role of the participant observer. In the context of my observations, this role aligns closely with my overall goal as I was able to actively engage in documenting the training process while participating in discussions and interactions with both the trainer and client. This method truly allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of training dynamics between professional and client.

I also took note of the skills a participant observer should have at the end of this chapter. Going in order addressed in the chapter, the skills of a participant observer are, learning the language, building explicit awareness, building memory, maintaining naivete, building writing skills, and hanging out / gaining rapport (Bernard pg. 5c-5l). I chose a few to focus on perfecting for this experience. The first was gaining rapport. As stated in the chapter, "hanging out is a skill" (Bernard pg. 5j). While I personally knew the trainer I shadowed, I had never met the client. It was essential this client feel at ease in my presence in order for them to be able to work effectively. I did this by hanging out. I had a dog the trainer wanted me to bring as part of the exercise. By bringing me into the training itself it was easier for the client to be able to focus on their training as well, as it seemed to them, I belonged. I also wanted to focus on learning the language, but not in a way that may be typical. Being a part of the dog community, I know a lot of the language used by professionals. This makes it easy to gain rapport with professionals in the community. However, I also needed to focus on the client as well, who did not know the

language. In this case it was important to be able to identify language typically used in the dog community and be able to explain it in a way the client can understand, without making them feel small.

As discussed in previous documents, ethical practices are of the utmost importance when completing these exercises. While last time I conducted covert observations in a public place, negating the need for any form of access permission or consent forms, during this exercise I conducted overt observations on private property. Due to this I did get consent forms from both the trainer and the client which you can find attached to the link below, and I did get permission from them both to be at the client's house.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/13LGpCYbHtMDQhwE2tbhr7ofJPNGceSyVoUFMgDvhbWs/edit?usp=sharing>

Looking specifically at the chapter by Jay Hasbrouck, his work emphasizes the intimate nature of participatory observation in regard to ethnographic research. There is a balance needed between being an observer and being a participant. As ethnographers, it is important we build rapport in order to uncover experiences that we may not have uncovered through other research methods, such as surveys.

Hasbrouck also discusses the concept of “going native – a condition in which they lose their critical perspective because they become so fully engaged in immersive participation that they begin to feel as if the culture is their own” (Hasbrouck pg. 47). I found this concept rather interesting having been described as a potential pitfall. When you become so engrossed in a culture you may lose your own perspective and risk alienating other participants. In relation to my exercise, I am already in the culture I was studying. It was my goal to disengage with it

enough to be able to look at it through the eyes of an average pet owner. In summary, the passage underscores the intricate nature of participatory observation and the continuous self-reflection and adaptation it requires. These principles are applicable to ethnographic research in various contexts, including the study of a professional dog trainer, and serve as a reminder of the responsibilities and ethical considerations inherent in such research.

Works Cited

Chapter 12: Participant Observation 2011. Bernard, H. Russell. Research Methods in

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Hasbrouck, Jay. 2017. Chapter 5: Immersing Fully. IN Ethnographic Thinking: From Method to

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