In Defense of Doing Nothing: The Methodological Utility of Introversion

by Peter Moskos [1]

One can be forgiven for thinking that everything has already been written about qualitative methods. There are articles, chapters, and books on research design, internal review boards, access, symbolic interactionism, grounded theory, the dramaturgical perspective, ethnography as work, paradigm development, entry, online research, semiotics, professionalization, ethnomethodology, autoethnography, interviewing, thick description, ethics, phenomenology, immersion, going native, exiting, analyzing field notes, writing field notes, *ad infinitum* and perhaps, even, *ad nauseam*.[2]

Still with me? Good. I will leave well enough alone (and a thorough review of the literature to future graduate students). My goal is much more modest: to introduce a psychological concept—introversion—into the sociological world. A greater awareness and understanding of introversion could help current and future ethnographers appreciate and exploit natural skills beneficial to qualitative fieldwork, particularly the difficult and overlooked early stage of participant-observation research.

Introversion as a Methodological Tool

Carl Jung (1921) defined introversion and extroversion in terms of "psychic energy." Extroverts have an outward flow of energy, Jung believed, and introverts have an inward flow. While this language is dated in contemporary psychology, Jung's basic concept still provides a useful framework for a sociological understanding of social interaction. Unfortunately, perhaps because of its psychological roots and application to the individual, introversion has been ignored by sociologists and qualitative methodologists. Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines introversion as "the state of or tendency toward being wholly or predominantly concerned with and interested in one's own mental life." But this dictionary definition does not explain the social and methodological concept of introversion, nor does it explain how the researcher can exploit introverted traits as fieldwork tools.

To understand introversion it may first be helpful to understand what introversion is not. For starters, introversion is not shyness. Even though there can be and often is overlap between introversion and shyness, they are not synonymous. Some introverts are shy, but many are not. Some introverts have terrible stage fright; others are excellent public speakers. Some introverts are asocial; others may have elegant social graces. Put another way, introversion is simply the

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[1] Moskos is a professor of Law, Police Science, and Criminal Justice Administration at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Citation: Moskos, Peter. 2011. "In Defense of Doing Nothing: The Methodological Utility of Introversion." Ieva Zake and Michael DeCesare (eds.). *New Directions in Sociology: Essays on Theory and Methodology in the 21st Century.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co.

[2] The above concepts can be found, respectively, in the works of LeCompte 1999, Miller and Bell 2002, Blumer 1969, Glaser and Strauss 1967, Glaser 1978, Goffman 1959, Willin and Fine 2007, Willis 2007, Fetterman 2010, Kozinets 2010, Lee 1999, Janowitz 1972, Katz 1988, Reed-Danahay 1997, Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, Rubin and Rubin 2005, Geertz 1977, Mauthner et al. 2002, Moustakas 1994, Madden 2010, O'Reilly 2009, Van Maanen 1988, Emerson et al. 1995, and Becker 1998. Of course this is not an exhaustive list.

opposite of being an extrovert. And it may be easier to grasp the qualities of extroverts: people who are talkative, the life of the party, and comfortable with social situations and strangers. Extroverts are energized by crowds and mingling, while introverts become tired at the mere thought and need to be alone to gain energy. [3] Alone, extroverts become bored.

Introversion and extroversion are not dichotomous variables but rather divergent ends of a wide spectrum of personality types. Neither is good or bad or better than the other. Introversion is not a problem to be overcome (which may contrast with general shyness and anxiety, for which your doctor will be happy to write a prescription). And it should be noted that many introverts have traits associated with creativity, concentration, and success in school. That said, American culture generally favors extroverts in business and social situations. Perhaps, as some have claimed, introverts make up about a third of the general population and over half of the gifted population. Who knows? Whatever the real figures may be, it is no stretch of the imagination to observe that the halls of academia are filled with a disproportionately large share of socially awkward, bookish, and introverted personalities.

Here, I wish to present introversion as a simple way of understanding individual traits in fieldwork situations. Marti Olsen Laney (2002) provides an excellent quick test of introversion.[4] A person who agrees with fourteen or fifteen of the following questions has a personality evenly split between introversion and extroversion. The more statements you agree with, the more introverted you are; the fewer you agree with, the more extroverted you are. More than half these questions (which I have put in italics) directly relate to qualitative fieldwork.

1. *When I work on projects, I like to have larger uninterrupted time periods rather than smaller chunks.*
2. *I sometimes rehearse things before speaking, occasionally writing notes for myself.*
3. *In general, I like to listen more than I like to talk.*
4. People sometimes think I'm quiet, mysterious, aloof or calm.
5. I like to share special occasions with just one person or a few close friends, rather than have big celebrations.
6. *I usually need to think before I respond or speak.*
7. *I tend to notice details many people don't see.*
8. *If two people have just had a fight, I feel the tension in the air.*
9. *If I say I will do something, I almost always do it.*
10. *I feel anxious if I have a deadline or pressure to finish a project.*
11. I can "zone out" if too much is going on.
12. *I like to watch an activity for a while before I decide to join in.*
13. *I form lasting relationships.*

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[3] In the interests of full disclosure, I am not shy and have no fear of public speaking, yet I positively dislike mingling with strangers at parties and usually find extroverts extremely tiring. My rather recent personal understanding of introversion led to the formulation of the concepts in this chapter. I also wish to thank all the presenters and audience members who failed to attend one of the last scheduled sessions at the Eastern Sociology Society's 2010 annual meeting in Boston. The result, five people talking informally in an empty room, proved to be the most interesting and productive conference session I have ever attended!
[4] Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, Isabel Briggs, Mary H. McCaulley, Naomi L. Quenk, Allen L. Hammer (1998) MBTI Manual (3rd edition). Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press) provides another more well-known personality test that includes an introversion/extroversion scale. But Laney's test is perfectly suited for the scope of this chapter.

14. *I don't like to interrupt others; I don't like to be interrupted.*
15. *When I take in lots of information, it takes me a while to sort it out.*
16. I don't like over-stimulating environments. I can't imagine why folks want to go to horror movies or go on roller coasters.
17. I sometimes have strong reactions to smells, tastes, foods, weather, noises, etc.
18. *I am creative and/or imaginative.*
19. I feel drained after social situations, even when I enjoy myself.
20. *I prefer to be introduced rather than to introduce others.*
21. I can become grouchy if I'm around people or activities too long.
22. *I often feel uncomfortable in new surroundings.*
23. I like people to come to my home, but I don't like them to stay too long.
24. I often dread returning phone calls.
25. I find my mind sometimes goes blank when I meet people or when I am asked to speak unexpectedly.
26. I talk slowly or have gaps in my words, especially if I am tired or if I am trying to speak and think at once.
27. I don't think of casual acquaintances as friends.
28. I feel as if I can't show other people my work or ideas until they are fully formulated.
29. *Other people may surprise me by thinking I am smarter than I think I am.*[5]

Undoubtedly participant-observation fieldwork involves a lot of boredom and standing around. In any fieldwork there will be periods of downtime. After all, the purpose of participant-observation is to observe unedited reality. When observing a work environment, not only does the researcher have to overcome any natural boredom inherent in that work, but the researcher needs to justify his or her presence—and probably an unpaid presence at that—to those who are paid to be there and still wish they were elsewhere.

Ethnographers needn't and indeed shouldn't be too eager for things to happen. The researcher is not filming an episode of *Cops* or a foreign documentary. You, as the researcher, are there to observe people in their normal setting. And when those you observe have nothing to do, they may not want to talk to you. Don't take it personally. You may see their break as prime time to ask down-and-dirty questions. But they, at least the introverts among them, may simply want to be left alone.

There is no need to go out and be the life of the party. In a new research situation, it's good to stay on the reserved side, to be (or at least act like) the introvert. I like to advise researchers to bring something to pass the time, something to read (this, of course, is good advice for life in general). Catching up on homework is fine. So is texting friends. And there's no shame in reading magazines or pulp fiction. The point here isn't to make an impression or impress people with your varied or edgy selection of reading material (or the simple fact that you read at all) but rather to survive the drudgery of fieldwork. Luckily, introverts are less easily bored than extroverts and are happier to spend time alone in their thoughts. Fieldwork is not a sprint. Reading allows you to settle in for the long haul. There may be months or even years ahead. And days or even weeks of unproductive fieldwork are par for the course.

Unlike those you are observing, who actually have something to do, the participant observer lacks a clear function. Most of my research in Baltimore, which culminated in my book

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[5] Copyright Marti Olsen Laney. Reprinted here with permission. For a full explanation see Laney (2002:30-35). I scored 21 out of 29 on her test, which would make me a moderate introvert.

Cop in the Hood, was conducted while I was employed as a police officer. This helped me and my research tremendously, but other participant-observers may not have that luxury. Without a clear function in a social setting, the introvert's natural reaction is to withdraw and become silent. While this may be a problem at the annual Christmas party, it can come in handy for the researcher.

The actual purpose of participant-observation research is to observe. And one attribute associated with introversion is the ability to notice details lost on others (see #7 above). I doubt the ability to notice details is the unique province of introverts, but inasmuch as this is a characteristic of introverts, it gives introverts a tremendous advantage in observational research. If you're an extrovert, it can even help to act like an introvert. An extroverted ethnographer told me, "I'm an extrovert by nature. But when I do my fieldwork I become an introvert." The fact that he can overcome his natural extroversion to conduct excellent fieldwork is as much a testament to his research ability as it is a demonstration of how much easier social scientific fieldwork might be for a natural introvert. While some extroverts can act introverted, it's easier if you don't have to consciously make the effort.

In conversation, introverts have a natural desire not to impose themselves on others (see #3 above). This, more than any other introvert personality trait, may keep potentially excellent participant-observers from conducting research. Introverts don't like starting conversation with strangers. Luckily, you don't have to. There are numerous advantages to keeping your mouth shut. I'm not talking about cloister-order silence (there's something to be said for good social graces and the ability to make polite small talk) but natural conversational reticence benefits the researcher. Having the right question at hand is less important than the ability to listen. And if you talk too much you may say the wrong thing (#2 above) or, quite frankly, people may not like you. While in life it may or may not be better to be loved by some and disliked by others, for the ethnographer it is much more important to be tolerated by all. Better to lose the Miss Congeniality Contest than turn off half the group you wish to study.

If you're quiet and accessible, people will approach you (see #20 above). Although being approached has certain methodological hazards—dealing with non-random selection, conversing with people with a grudge to settle, having to listen to crazy people—it is also a great research opportunity. People who approach you want to get to know you. And for the introvert, who usually feels better talking one-on-one than in groups, an exchange of personal information through conversation functions as a ritual exchange of gifts (Mauss 2000). The more you tell, the greater the subject's debt to you.

The first person to approach you may be a loudmouth or a bully of the group who wants to test you. Or perhaps it's somebody who's just curious or bored. The problem on "Day One" is that you, the researcher, don't know this particular society's Who's Who. If you buddy it up with Mr. Blowhard, you may alienate other people present. This is much more likely in a work environment, where people may have little control over their associations. In a social setting, however, the alpha dog's acceptance of you may be absolutely essential to the continuation of your research.

Since there is a risk every time you open your mouth, researchers should play it safe in the beginning. You may think you're charming and a joy to be around. Indeed, you may be. But things are different in the field. People who interrupt routines—especially researchers perceived as eggheads who know less about the matter than the people being studied—should not expect to be greeted with open arms and a loving embrace. The researcher isn't there to tell those being observed what to do or how to do it. Extroverted researchers should remind themselves that they may not be as charming or smart as they think they are. A bad joke or witty aside can come back

to haunt you. You can always build access over time, but it can be impossible to recover from a bad first impression. Extroverts have to watch what they say. The introvert is naturally disinclined to do so. This was actually put to me very bluntly in the police academy: "If in doubt, shut your mouth and look sharp."

Long-term immersion and participant-observation researchers—especially if the researcher is actually participating—will inevitably see life's usual squabbles and feuds and friendships. Leaving aside issues of objectivity, the simple fact is that when you pick friends, you pick sides. And while it's almost impossible to imagine good data coming from a long-term ethnography that does not involve friendship, the researcher should resist seeking friendship too early. Before you join a team, it's good to know the sides, or at least what game is being played. Here again the natural reservations of introverts come in handy, as introverts are less likely than extroverts to develop quick friendships.

My police research started in 1997, in Amsterdam. I generally conducted my observations in the evening through the early hours of the morning. During periods late at night when nothing much was happening, cops would down cup after cup of lousy coffee to stay awake. Sometimes I would be asked, "Why don't you go home?" I explained that I wasn't there to see "action" but rather to understand police officers. And the late shift was better because bosses weren't around and cops were more natural and relaxed (plus, I'm naturally a night owl). This answer worked for two reasons. One, it was honest. Two, and though I barely knew it at the time, it showed a moderately advanced understanding of police culture (see #29 above). Then, if there were no more questions, I'd go back to reading my book. But I also realized that I wasn't going to win any award for staying to the bitter end of the midnight shift. I am no martyr. And sometimes sticking around just made me look like a fool. I could leave. So sometimes I did. If you can't think of an answer as to why you're there, perhaps you *should* go home

Introversion in the Field

For the doctoral student, it's only after completing the initial scholastic and logistical hassles—finishing course work, selecting an advisor, writing a dissertation proposal, winning the internal review board's approval, gaining access, and perhaps moving to a new and foreign city or country—that the fieldwork starts. The fun is supposed to begin. But when you arrive at the research site, *what are you actually supposed to do?* It's a shockingly basic question that is all but absent from the literature on methodology. Introverts should not fear because, as a T-shirt should say, "introverts do it better in the field."

Day One is probably the most awkward and difficult day for the researcher. There is no how-to-section for Day One ethnography. While some may relish the opportunity to jump headfirst into a new environment filled with people they don't know, introverts most certainly do not. And the anxiety of anticipating the unknown may be matched only by the fear of what to actually do when there.

Some, the more extroverted, may feel a need to simply "do something." And this isn't always a bad idea. Generally, soon after I start research, I like to hand out a questionnaire. Qualitative and quantitative research complement each other very well (an idea too often lost on both sides of the great methodological divide). Questionnaire data serve nicely to supplement qualitative intuition. And questionnaires have an added benefit for the introverted researcher in serving as a calling card and form of introduction. It explains the researcher's presence. It makes it

look like the researcher is actually doing something productive. If that works for you, great. But it's not essential.

In 1999, I entered the Baltimore City Police Academy, in uniform but unpaid, for what I thought would be twelve months of research on the socialization of police officers. Surrounded by strangers and immersed in a new and foreign social environment, it seemed to me as if I had dropped in on one of the world's worst cocktail parties—only without the cocktails. As a researcher, you will likely have a similar experience. It's not easy. Everybody else already has a role defined by contract, custom, tradition, or need. You're a clueless college boy or girl coming to observe. Some people may briefly introduce themselves before returning to whatever they were doing. Others may sign a consent form that serves (contrary to its only stated purpose) to protect the researcher far more than it informs or protects the too clinically named "research subjects."[6]

At the beginning of the fieldwork, the researcher should expect to be viewed with some suspicion (if not downright bafflement). The obvious question you will be asked is, "What are you doing?" You need an answer, and you should probably hold off on delving into Marxist theories of class oppression. A simple answer is usually best. I've found that the entire field of sociology remains a foreign concept to most police officers and is often confused with psychology or social work. Ethnography? Forget about it. Something like "writing a book" or "doing a school research project" is usually more than adequate. But if questioned further, I tried to explain my research goals as clearly as possible (a task made difficult by the fact that I really had no clear research goals). And to ease suspicion that comes natural to police officers, I would truthfully add that I was writing a book about policing in general and not police officers in particular.

On the first day of the academy, each member of my class was asked why he or she wanted to be a police officer. I had to explain to this class of police officer recruits (educational requirements: high-school diploma or G.E.D.) that I was a Harvard University graduate student doing research. It was not an easy speech to give. At the time, I didn't even know I was going to be a police officer, much less why I wanted to be one. Despite my academy uniform, I labeled myself as an outsider in a room full of people hoping desperately to become insiders. In hindsight—and though the introvert in me would not have been so quick to make this proclamation—it turned out for the best. Being overt, which was an internal review board requirement, made research much easier. And I hate to think I might have put myself in a position, months later, of having to explain my apparent deception to those who had since become my friends.

During that first day, as the fates would have it, my research status changed drastically. My project had been rather quickly and unexpectedly disapproved by the acting commissioner. He gave me the rather stark choice of trying to join the department as a bona fide police officer or returning to graduate school with my tail between my legs and no obvious doctoral dissertation plan in sight. Even at this point, introversion, as I later identified it, came in handy. To some extent, I did not control my destiny. There were larger bureaucratic and institutional factors at

[6] I strongly urge researchers to gain internal review board approval without required a signed consent form. It is possible, and, in reality, much more possible than having groups of people sign consent forms in fluid situations. Though it might facilitate IRB approval to state that all research subjects will sign consent forms and confidentiality would never be violated, it is not honest. The former, at least in the police world, denies the reality of participant-observation research, and the latter, potentially, your ethical obligations as a human being.

work in both the Baltimore City Police Department and Harvard's sociology department. Rather than overreacting and attempting to "do something," I simply rolled with the waves and drifted where the prevailing winds pushed me. Six months later, I was given a badge, a gun, and went to police the rough streets of the Eastern District. This was an opportunity, more than any other, that helped and defined my academic life.

So what should you do on Day One? The short answer is simple: nothing! Of course that over-simplifies. You actually do a lot. Sort of. But you don't have to *do* anything. Say hello. Observe. Acclimate. The only essential thing is that you write everything up when you go home. And the more you write the better. Especially in the first few days. After the first day of research you may not even know what you saw. But the important thing is to write. I'm not necessarily talking about Geertzian "thick description," but write about what you saw, your thoughts, your feelings, your fears, your expectations. Write letters to friends (and save a copy for yourself). Do whatever allows you to write. The more you write, the better. And even if these early words do not become part of your finished dissertation or book, at the end, when you feel like you understand everything too well (or not at all), these will be great pages to read. So whatever you do, write!

But writing is hard work, so let's get back to the introverted benefits of doing nothing. When I began my Amsterdam research, I met a supportive station chief and was given a brief tour of the building and introduced to the men and women working the shift. Then I was left to my own devices. I had no clue what to do. I was nervous and anxious. So I did what comes naturally to any introvert in a crowded room full of strangers. I did nothing. I stood around. Other times I sat. And so, slowly and steadily, my research began. Paul Rock (2007, 23) offers excellent advice, or, at least for me, ex post facto justification:

> It is best to look and see what can be seen, to try to get some sense of the regularities of what is before one. It would be foolish to plunge in too soon with naïve questions. Such a step might only expose the sociologist's lack of understanding, and exhaust whatever limited goodwill there may be. Busy people will not consent to be interviewed repeatedly by the manifestly inept.
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> It is better to remain on the margins at first, available, just about visible, but not too demanding. Show interest. See who the others about one are. Observe those whom they deal with. Be available. Observe and chart everyday routines. Listen to others: being prepared to listen is a rare enough asset in social life and it will be rewarded (La Rouchefoucauld once defined a bore as someone who talks about himself when you want to talk about *your* self).

If you're an introvert, all this should come naturally. Gradually I slipped into a routine. Before too long, as I would hang out, I noticed more and started to see greater order in the chaos. When things were happening, I would follow. This didn't always work. At least not at first. More than once a police officer seemed hell-bent on an urgent mission. I jumped up and followed him or her . . . right up to the bathroom door. This left me in the not-so-suave position of covering my faux pas by pretending to be really interested in the notices posted in the hallway. Luckily, my cluelessness and blasé-fronted anxiety were often mistaken for confidence and professionalism. Gradually officers invited me along to things they felt would interest me. Without me being pushy, police officers opened up to me. This is generally typical of ethnographic work. And perhaps somewhat surprising to the uninitiated.

After my presence became expected, I began interviewing police officers one-on-one. This was not a complicated process (it helped that I had previously been granted carte blanche by the

station's chief). I started by asking officers I felt more comfortable with if they would be willing to be interviewed. Nobody declined. People generally like to tell their story. Plus some had questions for me. Once I had done a few interviews, word spread through the grapevine. A few officers even volunteered to be interviewed.[7]

Conclusion

The interpersonal nature of qualitative research and the perceived "action" of participant-observation research may perpetuate a belief that extroversion is a good quality for ethnographers. In fact, nothing is further from the truth. Ethnographer Mitchell Duneier told me that too often students come to him saying, "I'm not outgoing enough to do fieldwork." But one does not need to be extroverted to be successful in fieldwork. Indeed, it may be more useful for ethnographers *not* to be extroverted. There is no single "correct" way to conduct qualitative fieldwork. But the qualities associated with introversion are, if not essential, at the very least incredibly helpful for successful long-term ethnographic research. And the kinds of social skills needed for ethnography may go against popular convention as to what it means to have "good social skills."

If you've ever seen a group of ethnographers party, you may be struck by a general sense that we may not have been the most popular kids in high school. Despite what is often a very lively style of writing, ethnographers can be soft-spoken and introverted. Now don't get me wrong: As a group, we ethnographers are hardly the dorkiest in school (a few other academic disciplines spring to mind, but for politics' sake I'll refrain.). Qualitative researchers must have basic social skills, but let's be honest, no prom king or queen ever went on to write an ethnography. As a group, almost by definition, academics are nerds. We like the library. We don't mind being alone. We walk down the street reading. We thrive in small groups and intellectual conversations. And yet mingling and making small talk with strangers is tiresome at best or frightening at worst.

Is all of this sociology of the obvious? I hope not. Is it simple? Perhaps, but hopefully not simplistic. What is an "informal interview" other than a twenty-five-cent word for talking to people? What is "grounded theory" but a fancy way of saying you don't have a theory? Just because the concept of introversion is relatively simple does not limit its potential application. To rise above the "sociology of the obvious" one needs to see the significance of the mundane and make connections and theories where others might just see business as usual. "Sociology will be satisfying, in the long run," said Peter Berger (1963, 24), "only to those who can think of nothing

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[7] In the police world, I find formal interviews to be less productive than casual conversations (aka "informal interviews"). Honest opinions, casual quips, and common-sense observations can be held against police in our legalistic and politically correct culture. Police officers generally, and often with good reason, clam up when being recorded. When a tape recorder is running, police begin to sound like cops on the TV show *Cops*. I rather quickly abandoned formal recorded interviews in the field and gathered all conversational data through normal (if focused) conversation. Along with saving me the hassle of transcription, non-recorded interviews give the interviewees plausible deniability should they ever need to cover themselves. For instance, just today I had dinner with a friend and ranking police officer who offered a lively quote that would never be captured in a recorded interview: "Russians in Brighton Beach do nothing but steal cars! Then they go to sleep and dream about stealing more cars."

more entrancing than to watch [people] and to understand things human." And this is where introverts thrive.

All too often, sociological writing ends with call for further research. And I will too. But unlike some, I really mean it. It is my hope that qualitative researchers in general and ethnographers in particular begin to examine the role that introversion plays in qualitative methodology. By habit and professional pride, sociologists are disinclined to focus on individual traits. Introversion, though popularized by Jung, could just as easily have come from the mind of Durkheim. Does not the inward or outward flow of individual "psychic energy" greatly affect organic solidarity? It is but a small sociological step from introversion to group dynamics, which places the concept of introversion firmly in the realm of sociology tradition.

With a greater understanding of introversion, I hope sociologists can take advantage of psychological traits that come naturally to many already in the field. Students considering qualitative research should see introversion as an asset rather than a hindrance. I hope I have shown, or at least opened the possibility, that introverts have unique skills that benefit ethnography, participant observation, and qualitative fieldwork. And if a simple awareness of introversion encourages more researchers to enter the field, then I have succeeded. At the very least, I hope to ease the qualitative researcher's dread about that one simple question on Day One: *Now that I'm here and surrounded by strangers, what do I do?* Don't despair. Do nothing!

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