

THE FOUR SQUARE LAUNDRY: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION IN A WAR ZONE*

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I awoke one morning to see him in my bedroom pointing [a submachine gun] at me. "Right," he said, "you're a Four Square Laundry job." This was an allusion to being an army spy.

—Frank Burton, quoted in Jeffrey A. Sluka, 1995

Thanks to his dangerous and frightening experiences in West Belfast, Frank Burton's ethnographic research on Northern Ireland is considered legendary.¹ At first glance the incident Burton describes would seem mad to anyone who has not spent time living and working in the Catholic ghettos of Belfast. However, as alarming as this event may seem, it speaks more to the rapport Burton established with his respondents than to the perils of fieldwork. In actuality this was a prank brought about by one of his Irish Republican Army (IRA) informants.

The hazing of researchers is a common practice in Belfast, and anyone who conducts inquiries of this nature is bound to collect a few such "war stories" (Sluka 1989, 1995). The obvious reason for such a vetting is that the IRA feared that a British undercover operative disguised as an academic would infiltrate the organization. Having said that, I believe that researchers are not only checked out as potential spies but also tested to see whether they have the "salt" to stick it out when the political atmosphere makes day-to-day life difficult. In other words, the researcher has to prove that, when placed in a life-threatening situation, even for just a moment, she or he won't simply pack up and go home.

There are obvious dangers in conducting participant observation in a violent social context. However, the researcher "not only observes the behavior of the group that she or he is studying, but also participates, as much as possible, in the daily lives of the community members" (Dowler 1999, 195). When I lived in Belfast, it was still a turbulent and violent study area.² The violence notwithstanding, uneventful encounters with one's respondents, even notorious ones, were the earmark of participant observation (Dowler 2001). When you live and work within a community for an extended period of time you acquire local knowledge. To my surprise, community members would often point out individuals who were "involved," which was usually accompanied with a humorous tale that, interestingly, never related to their

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