

FROM SPY TO OKAY GUY: TRUST AND VALIDITY IN FIELDWORK WITH THE POLICE

STEVE HERBERT

Of the several sergeants in the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) whom I accompanied during eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in 1993 and 1994, one was an aspiring crime novelist. Not surprisingly, he set his stories in a police patrol division. After I accompanied him a few times, he introduced a character based on me into the novel he was writing. He told me that my character performed a useful narrative function: Conversations between the officers and the ethnographer allowed him to introduce the essentials of police work into the story. Of great interest to me was the relationship between the fictional observer and the observed. Initially, the officers were suspicious. Because the ethnographer had received permission from the police chief to do the research, "Everyone thinks he's a spy," the author-sergeant told me. However, over time the ethnographer gained the trust of the officers. By the middle of the story, according to the sergeant, "Everyone thinks he's an okay guy."

I came to believe that my fictional transformation from "spy" to "okay guy" mirrored reality. Initially wary and skeptical of my presence, most officers grew friendly and helpful with time. This transformation raises a number of interesting and important questions: Why were the officers initially wary? Did they behave differently in my presence; and if so, how? Why did the transformation occur? What do these dynamics, concerning as they do the shifting ground on which ethnographic relationships are established, say about the type of data I gathered and how I gathered them? These questions are important, in large measure because they point to one of the critical issues in ethnography—the acquisition of valid data. How *can* an ethnographer ever be sure that behavior witnessed is, in fact, natural in that setting? How to account for the effect of the ethnographer's presence on the behavior of those under study? And if their behavior is affected, should the ethnographer's data and conclusions be considered suspect?

It is validity that I explore here, in the context of my fieldwork experience. To do so, it is useful first to take a step back and assess where things stood when I entered the field. In the summer of 1993 the LAPD was a much-maligned and rigorously scrutinized organization. The beating of motorist Rodney King in 1991 had magnified long-standing concerns about police brutality, particularly in minority communities. Such concerns were legitimated by the so-called Christopher Commission, which exhaustively reviewed uses of force by the LAPD (Independent Commission 1991). The commission, named for its chairman, Warren Christopher, discovered that violent officers were insufficiently sanctioned, in keeping with an organizational culture

✪ DR. HERBERT is an assistant professor of geography at the University of Washington, Seattle, Washington 98195.