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A playful ethnography: laying the cards on the table of writing the field

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ABSTRACT

This short article revisits insights generated through a classroom exercise designed as a methodological device for exploring key aspects of ethnographic observation and fieldnote writing. Centred on a modified card game, the activity assigned distinct roles to players with divergent instructions, to observers focusing on different dynamics, and to a group tasked with observing the observers, enabling multiple perspectives on the same social interaction. The resulting fieldnotes, composed by two student groups 1 year apart, revealed variation in what was noticed (and what was not) about bodies in the field, how these observations were described, and how meaning was tentatively constructed across observers. Drawing on this experience, the article argues that brief, structured simulations can render visible the embodied nature of ethnographic description. The exercise sheds light on the challenges and choices inherent in ethnographic practice, offering insight into the entanglement of observation and recording in producing ethnographic accounts.

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Opening the deck: introduction

Playing cards is interwoven with my childhood; in early 1980s Italy, it was a widespread pastime shared across generations in families and social clubs. My grandmother, Maria, spent countless hours playing *rubamazzo* (a simple card-stealing game) and *briscola* (a strategic trick-taking game) with me during the Christmas holidays, teaching me the importance of patience and luck (through the first) and of careful observation and strategy (through the second). Alone, I passed summer afternoons at the campsite playing *solitaire*, or *scala quaranta* (a rummy-style game) with friends, while in the evenings I watched the grown-ups play *beccacino*, a fast, lively local game, and *tressette*, a traditional trick-taking game, often placing small bets as the game became livelier.

Against this backdrop, I read Supper's (2023) adaptation of the fast-paced card game UNO for a classroom exercise on participant observation. I was already familiar with the game in its standard form: players take turns discarding cards and strategically intervening in the flow of play, reversing its order, interrupting others, or forcing opponents to

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draw extra cards, until one player empties their hand and wins. Reading the article, which details the rationale and design of the adaptation, sparked my interest as I was thinking about the syllabus for a course on *Qualitative Inquiry in Organisational Contexts*. As I was already engaging with ongoing reflections on classroom practices and experimentation within my department, the classroom exercise described in the article resonated as a particularly compelling way to make key aspects of ethnographic observation experientially accessible. At the same time, I found myself reflecting on how to situate this activity from a formal and ethical standpoint: within my institutional context, such classroom-based exercises can be conducted and their materials used for research purposes without requiring formal ethics committee approval under current regulations, provided that students are appropriately informed and give their consent. These considerations were further shaped through informal exchanges with colleagues teaching on the same programme, particularly around the use of classroom-generated materials for research and the positioning of such activities at the intersection of teaching and methodological inquiry. These reflections led me to incorporate the exercise into my teaching practice.

Crucially, play introduces an element of unpredictability, a defining feature of ethnographic fieldwork, in which the unexpected often becomes analytically significant. Supper's proposal offers a structured yet lively situation in which bodies interact, respond, hesitate, and attune to one another in ways that can be closely observed and recorded. The situation takes shape through a simple setup in which some students act as players and others as observers, guided by printed, card-like instructions. Some players are instructed to follow the standard rules, while others receive prompts that invite them to disregard certain ones. Observers take fieldnotes as the game unfolds, attending to different dynamics of the interaction, with some also focusing on how other observers position themselves and direct their attention.

I had first carried out the activity with 17 students in 2023 and, with their consent, kept their fieldnotes and recorded the contributions that emerged during our discussion. Students were informed that their materials could be used for research inquiry into ethnographic observation and fieldnote writing, and that their decision to share them would have no bearing on course assessment. I repeated the exercise with a group of 14 students in 2025, again retaining their notes and my annotations. Staging and observing a familiar game within an unusual setting heightened the scene's corporeal nuances: how people positioned themselves, leaned in or pulled back, adjusted their gaze, and attuned to the gestures and movements of others. This effect was amplified by some players bending the rules, which subtly unsettled observers' expectations of how a well-known game should unfold, as well as by the destabilisation of the conventional observer/observed dichotomy at the heart of ethnographic practice, drawing attention to how bodies orient, negotiate space, and inhabit roles.

Reflecting on the similarities and differences between the two occasions made me increasingly curious to revisit these experiences as moments in which I could look closely at the practice of writing ethnographic notes, particularly in its embodied dimensions: how attention moved, what drew the body in, what was set aside, and which boundaries of relevance were enacted in the moment. This offered a rare opportunity, given that ethnographic accounts usually centre on the researcher's own practice rather than on observing the note-taking of others. In what follows, I turn away from the exercise as

a teaching device and attend instead to what becomes visible when the practice of writing fieldnotes is taken as an object of attention. The notes are approached as traces of situated attention, shaped by bodies, positions, and moments of uncertainty as the scene unfolds.

Setting the table: embodiment and space in fieldwork

Calls to bring the body in have shaped sociological debates for several decades, contributing to what has been described as a somatic turn in the social sciences (Thomas, 2013). Scholarly work has increasingly examined how lived bodily experience becomes central to fieldwork and how the ethnographer's body comes to function as an instrument through which the field is encountered and rendered meaningful, whether in Wacquant's (2006) ethnographic accounts of becoming a boxer or in research examining embodied practices in institutional settings (Gariglio, 2017).

Growing attention to corporeality and sensory perception has encouraged ethnographers to reflect more explicitly on the sensorial nature of research encounters (Pink, 2009). Sensory approaches have thus become a deliberate mode of practice, prompting researchers to seek occasions for shared corporeal experience. In this view, perceptual engagement is integral to how phenomena are apprehended, while also exposing the limits of written notes, which can struggle to hold the textures, rhythms, and fleeting sensations through which meaning takes shape.

Across these trajectories, an embodied perspective has emerged, in which the researcher's body is understood as a central yet exhaustible resource for fieldwork, implicated in the sensory and affective labour of attending to social life. Thanem and Knights (2019) emphasise how ethnographers negotiate their bodily presence, attention, and movements in ways that shape both what can be observed and how it is written, as well as the constraints and affordances that specific spaces impose on the bodies within them.

These perspectives informed my approach to the classroom exercise and helped shape how I understood the embodied and spatial conditions in which it took place. In the first iteration, the classroom was large and modern, with fixed desks and ample space for two separate games to take place simultaneously. This arrangement dispersed bodies across the room and drew observers' attention to different moments unfolding in parallel. The room's spaciousness dulled the sensory cues that might otherwise have guided my focus, making it difficult to focus on any single point. As Emerson et al. (2011) suggest, ethnographers are often drawn to what appears unexpected, whereas more routine moments can be harder to sustain as objects of description. In this first iteration, this dynamic became visible in practice: when something seemingly unforeseen occurred at one table, observers of the other game would momentarily shift their gaze away from a calmer scene, interrupting both observation and note-writing to glance at what was unfolding elsewhere. Attention, writing, and bodily orientation thus moved together in response to perceived novelty.

A contrasting spatial and embodied configuration emerged in the second iteration. This time, the activity took place in a much smaller classroom housed in a sixteenth-century building, where thick, pastel-coloured walls, warm acoustics, and movable chairs created an atmosphere markedly different from that of the modern room used previously. Instead of two dispersed groups, the players arranged their chairs in a single

circle, using one chair as a makeshift table for the game. This close physical proximity sharpened the observers' embodied work, making gestures, hesitations, and postural micro-adjustments easier to perceive. The layered organisation of the scene also became more legible, with distinct observational positions emerging among players, observers, and those attending to the observers themselves. Alongside these shifts, my own position as an observer became more clearly situated, at times remaining at the periphery of the group and at other moments drawing closer to the players. I found myself more at ease with this group, to the point that, having arrived soaked from a sudden storm, I was barefoot during the session. The room's spatial intimacy made it easier to feel part of a shared moment rather than distantly positioned from one another. This embodied comfort attuned me more closely to how others leaned in, shifted their weight, or met each other's gaze, and to how these subtle cues animated the unfolding scene.

Across both iterations, similar embodied dynamics emerged when players bent the rules or when students assigned to observe the observers briefly and discreetly shifted their attention away from the game. These moments triggered immediate bodily responses among the other observers, such as raised eyebrows or quick glances, revealing a corporeal sensitivity to disruptions in the flow of the activity before these were articulated in interpretive terms. Both sessions therefore illustrate how embodiment and space shape what can be sensed and what becomes possible to write. Even in a simulated setting, the field is co-produced through movements, proximities, orientations, and atmospheres that bodies inhabit. Fieldnotes emerge from this entanglement; they trace how the body encounters and filters what becomes relevant in the moment.

In play: sensing and writing the field

Ethnographic notes take multiple forms, from brief jottings to detailed, evocative accounts. They may incorporate reminders, sketches, affective reflections, or sensory cues that resist written description (Emerson et al., 2011; Pussetti, 2022). Precisely because of this openness, the practice of writing fieldnotes entails continuous decisions about what counts as relevant and what is allowed to recede, even before questions of analysis arise. The exercise made these decisions unusually visible by placing the act of note-writing itself under observation, allowing me to attend to how different observers, watching the same scene, selected, framed, or omitted elements as they wrote the field.

Attending to note-writing as it unfolded also brought my own position as an observer into view. Watching the students observe the game recalled an earlier fieldwork experience of mine, years before, observing adolescent parkour practitioners (Pioggia & Pizzolati 2014). In both situations, meaning emerged from a position of proximity without participation, through attention to tacit forms of coordination such as shared rhythms, subtle signals of alignment, and gestures through which bodies orient themselves to one another in action.

The fieldnotes produced across the two sessions reveal distinct ways in which embodiments – students' and mine – shaped what could be sensed and thus written. In the first iteration, where two parallel games unfolded in a large and modern classroom, descriptions tended to disperse across multiple centres of activity. Several observers focused primarily on the mechanics of play: cards drawn, minor disputes, the order of turns. Bodily cues appeared mostly when explicitly noticeable; such cues included raised

eyebrows, ironic smiles, or the momentary irritation expressed when the game's heaviest penalty was imposed. What became legible tended to be the exceptional: small bursts of tension, gestures replacing speech when silence was required or joking behaviour that briefly disrupted the rhythm of play. As one observer noted, 'communication happened through glances or taps on the table' – an indication that bodily expression made its way into the notes chiefly when verbal language was constrained.

Even within the same group, however, students varied considerably in how they attended to the scene. One observer concentrated on posture: who leaned in, who withdrew, how players arranged their arms and hands. Another, tasked with watching the observers, described her own shifting positions as she moved closer to note-takers or circled behind them, thus revealing a further layer of embodied presence: a meta-observer whose movements subtly reframed what was visible and writable. Yet, with bodies remaining dispersed in space, these layers often appeared in the notes as separate, parallel scenes rather than interwoven dynamics.

The second iteration generated a markedly different set of fieldnotes. The intimate, resonant room shaped what students could hear and sense, and therefore what they came to write. Observers documented gestures and micro-movements with greater precision: fingers twitching over a card, a foot tapping in hesitation, or several players raising their hands in synchrony. One note described how an observer 'changed position repeatedly', while another mentioned someone who 'stood up to gain a clearer view'. Others mentioned guarding their notebooks from sight, or shifting their bodies to avoid blocking another observer's line of vision. These inscriptions point to a heightened awareness of observation as a bodily practice shaped by where one stands, how one leans, or how one moves within a shared scene. In several cases, the awareness of being observed became, itself, an embodied theme in the notes: some described discomfort, exposure, or self-consciousness; others described moments of forgetting their role until a sudden glance or movement reminded them they were being watched.

Similar dynamics emerged in both sessions when players departed from the rules. Especially when speech was withheld in situations where it would normally be expected, the corporeal weight of silence emerged clearly in the accounts. Gestures became saturated with meaning, leading to confusion, humour, or fleeting tension. One description characterised the session as 'slowed down', noting that bodily expression had been 'the only way to show anything'. Another remarked that not speaking 'made the game feel heavier', a phrasing that resonates with sensory ethnographic accounts of how silence and sound contribute to the affective density of embodied encounters (Pink, 2009).

Writing becomes an embodied negotiation. Some students expanded their notes retrospectively, while others resisted elaboration, feeling that 'too much' would distort what had been sensed in the moment. During class discussion, several expressed surprise at how differently they and their peers had written about what they thought was the same event. This aligns with Flora and Andersen's (2019) observation that even when fieldworkers share a scene, their fieldnotes emerge as fragments shaped by bodily positioning, attention, interest, and context.

Certain moments stood out during the game without finding a place in the written notes. In the second iteration, for instance, I noticed a playful tap between two players and an exaggerated celebratory gesture from the winner of a round. Neither appeared in the observers' fieldnotes. When I mentioned this, one student, slightly embarrassed,

admitted, 'I saw it, but I didn't write it'. Such omissions suggest moments of bodily denial: reluctance to record gestures that felt too intimate, too fleeting or too closely tied to peers' personhood. These dynamics show how embodied ethics – comfort, distance, inhibition – shape what is written as much as what is seen.

Across both iterations, observers navigated their own bodily presence in the room. Some treated their bodies as obstacles, standing stiffly or remaining peripheral, reluctant to move. Others experimented with different vantage points, bending, standing, or weaving around players. These differences shaped the affordances and constraints of note-taking, showing writing the field is a situated practice inflected by bodies in motion, their proximity, and hesitation.

Closing the deck: conclusion

A card game is an inherently embodied and interactional activity: Playing requires attending to others, sensing their gestures, anticipating moves, and responding in turn. This made the exercise an instructive site for examining how the unfolding of a scene is sensed and translated into fieldnotes. Across the two iterations, what became visible was less an imitation of fieldwork and more a clarification of processes that often remain implicit in ethnographic practice. Bodies observing, bodies being observed, bodies writing – each moved differently depending on spatial configurations, assigned roles, and the expectations that shaped what seemed worth noting.

The exercise also offered a reminder that simulations cannot fully reproduce the uncertainty, discomfort, or social complexity of real-world fieldwork (Wästerfors, 2023). The specificity of any setting resists replication. Even so, the activity created a space in which embodied attention and positionality could be felt with unusual clarity, allowing the dynamics of observing and writing to stand out in their situated and selective character. What emerged was not a rule for when or where to write, but a heightened awareness of how observation is shaped by perspective, intention, and context, and of how fieldnotes remain partial and open to revision.

These reflections resonate with scholarship showing that fieldnotes are situated forms of inscription, often organised through metaphorical or choreographic understandings of practice (Crocker & McKee, 2020; Taylor, 2022; Wolf-Meyer & Elliott, 2023). The variation among the students' notes echoes discussions of fieldnoting as a creative and selective practice (Katz, 2019; Pacheco-Vega, 2019) guided by embodied attention as much as by analytic effort. It also connects with work highlighting the porousness between the ethnographic sensitivity cultivated in classrooms and that shaped through field experiences, where ways of attending, noticing, and writing travel across contexts (Skukauskaite, 2020).

Taken a step further, students in my case engaged in a shared exploration of where the limits of ethnographic observation begin to emerge. In this sense, the differences observed across participants and across the two groups bring into view how observation takes shape through position, attention, and interaction, and how what becomes available to analysis is produced within these situated engagements. From this perspective, the exercise echoes longstanding arguments that differences between observers can serve as a starting point for more precise questioning (Erickson & Stull, 2011). It also resonates with more recent discussions of how ethnographic validity is crafted through the

juxtaposition and negotiation of multiple accounts (Evans et al., 2015). In this sense, the classroom becomes a setting in which such conditions can be enacted and explored in practice. Working through an exercise together invites a collective and embodied engagement with method, bringing both mine and the students' attention to how observation and interpretation are continually configured as the field is encountered and written.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Micol Pizzolati**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Notes on contributor

Micol Pizzolati is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Bergamo, Italy. She works with a variety of approaches and methods. Her teaching in social research methods brings together material, visual, experiential, and collective forms of expression and reflection.

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Ethics statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of research integrity and ethical conduct set out in the regulations of the University of Bergamo (Rector's Decree No. 387/2016). Within this framework, formal approval from a Research Ethics Committee was not required for the secondary analysis of anonymised fieldnotes produced during regular teaching activities, and participants were informed about the possible use of their fieldnotes for research purposes and provided explicit consent.

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