The Ethics of Deception in Social Research: A Case Study

Erich Goode

Using data from a study on courtship through personal advertisements, I argue that Kai Erikson's classic case against disguised observation is flawed. Certain kinds of deception are necessary to gather certain data in certain settings. I placed bogus ads in a personal column to obtain and analyze responses. The data would have remained inaccessible—indeed, many of the responses would not have existed in the first place—without some measure of deception. While deception was used, no risk whatsoever was posed to respondents. I further argue that several of Erikson's criteria of risk do not separate ethical from empirical questions; informants use very different criteria in evaluating the risk of harm to them posed by social research that sociologists use. The question of exploitation is more complex, since it has to be weighed against how much of an effort my respondents made and hence, what it is exactly that I took from them. A "panel of judges" decided that most of my male (but not my female) respondents would not have gotten dates with my hypothetical ad placers, and that the research method I used was not especially unethical.

KEY WORDS: social research; ethical issues; disguised observation; courtship; personal ads.

In a classic essay, Kai Erikson (1967) argues that the use of disguised observation in social research should be regarded as unethical. It is unethical, Erikson suggests, "for a sociologist to deliberately misrepresent his [or her] identity for the purpose of entering a private domain to which he [or she] is not otherwise eligible"; second, he argues, "it is unethical for a sociologist to deliberately misrepresent the character of the research in which he [or she] is engaged" (1967: 373).

Direct correspondence to Erich Goode, Department of Sociology, State University of New York at Stony Brook, Stony Brook, NY 11794.
Erikson maintains four objections to disguised observation in social research. The first is that the research can harm actors in the social scene under study in ways that cannot be anticipated; in disguised observation, the researcher "does not know which of his [or her] actions are apt to hurt other people and it is presumptuous of him [or her] to act as if he [or she] does—particularly when, as is ordinarily the case, he [or she] has elected to wear a disguise exactly because he [or she] is entering a social sphere so far from his [or her] experience" (1967: 368).

Second, Erikson says, disguised observation and other forms of deception are likely to "damage the reputation of sociology in the larger society and close off promising areas of research for future investigators" (1967: 369).

Third, if graduate students are involved in research based on deception, the sociologist is forcing into morally ambiguous contexts persons who are not yet prepared to make painful and difficult ethical choices.

And fourth, which Erikson sees as the most important, in disguised observation, the sociologist has betrayed the complexity and subtlety of the social structure under observation. It seems "a little irresponsible," Erikson says, "for a sociologist to assume that he [or she] can enter social life in any masquerade that suits his [or her] purpose without seriously disrupting the scene he [or she] hopes to study" (1967: 370).

Perhaps the research project conducted over the past generation or two by a sociologist that has attracted the harshest criticism for employing what was (and still is) regarded by many observers as unethical research methods is Laud Humphreys' *Tearoom Trade* (1970, 1975). Interestingly, the most controversial feature of Humphrey's research was not his observing, and serving as a lookout for, men who were engaged in sex in public urinals. Rather, it was Humphreys' strategy of writing down the license plate numbers of the cars parked on a road adjacent to the parks where the urinals were located, then, a year or so later, tracking these men down and interviewing them by claiming to be conducting a "public health survey." On this, Humphrey claims to be guilty of the sin of omission ("less than full representation"), not commission ("false representation"). After all, loosely construed, he was conducting a "public health survey"—just not the sort any of his interviewees could have imagined they were participating in (1970: 177). But a decade after the research was conducted, Humphreys decided that his critics may have been right on at least one point. However, the problem was not deception, he said, but risk. "It seemed that I was interviewing subjects in the least disturbing and least dangerous manner possible. I now think my reasoning was faulty and that my respondents were placed in greater danger than deemed plausible at the time" (1975: 230). Instead of taking down license plate numbers, he says, he should have
interviewed a number of "willing respondents." By doing this, he admits, the sample of participants would not have been as representative as in the original study, but the data would have been richer. And his respondents would not have been exposed to the risk of arrest or stigma (1975: 231).

A sizeable literature has accumulated on the issue of the ethics of disguised observation and other forms of deception in social research. It should be sufficient here to stress the fact that the field is ambivalent on the question. An "unofficial reading" of the sort Erikson suggested has in fact been taken; however, its answer to his question is less than clear-cut. In a survey based on a random sample of names that appeared in the American Sociological Association membership list, Long and Dorn (1983) found that a high proportion of sociologists "tend, in principle, to condone deception in research if confessed and explained" (1983: 297). Six out of ten of Long and Dorn's sample disagreed with the statement: "It is ethically acceptable for sociologists to deceive research subjects and to expose them to temporary 'harm' so long as care is taken to eliminate long-term post-research effects." (Over a quarter agreed, however.) And four-fifths agreed with, "If a research subject has been deceived, the sociologist must provide full and detailed explanation to the subject of what has been done and the reasons for doing it" (1983: 295). According to Long and Dorn, sociologists favored neither "restrictions in research in the name of ethics, nor did they favor unrestricted research—an apparent inconsistency" (1983: 295). What are sociologists "willing to do" about ethics? Long and Dorn's data suggest "not too much" (1983: 297)—except write and talk about the subject.

The same ambivalence toward covert research methods tapped by Long and Dorn is reflected in the writings of sociologists on the subject. Adler, Adler and Rochford (1986) summarize the field's split on the issue by contrasting the classic Chicago School/symbolic interactionist approach, which rejects the deceptive, disguised, or covert role for fieldworker, and the existential, interpretive, and phenomenological school's more radical "conflict" approach, which condones it. To the Chicago sociologists (and their neo-Chicagoan descendants, including Kai Erikson), deception is wrong because it disrespects the intricate subtleties of the scene under investigation, it disrespects the integrity of one's informants, subjects, or respondents, and it compromises the researcher by assigning him or her to a specific insider role rather than permitting a more neutral, detached, or objective stance.

In contrast, existential sociologists, adopting a conflict paradigm, recognize that people hide crucial information from outsiders—or distort it even when they do reveal it. The researcher must therefore "dig behind people's superficial self-presentations and discover the truth about their attitudes and behavior" (Adler, Adler, & Rochford, 1986: 367). One way to
do this is to make use of the covert role, "in which the researcher disguises the purpose and interest behind his or her participation in the scene" (1986: 367). Fieldworkers should not be restrained by an absolutist ethic which is binding in any and all research situations; instead, existential sociologists feel that researchers "should be given the freedom to struggle individually with the moral and legal problems they encounter in each research situation" (1986: 368). According to Jack Douglas (1976), a major proponent of the existential "conflict" research style (or the "investigative" paradigm), the Chicago-style researchers engage in something of the "unholy alliance" (1976: 43) with the members of the group under study: If you let me into your world—as an overt, upfront researcher—I will promise only to report your socially acceptable side. I will never reveal—even if I am allowed to discover them—your deepest, ugliest secrets. Above all, I promise not to tell the whole truth about you! "Conflict" methodology argues that such a research strategy is impotent to counteract the inevitable problems of facades, evasions, and lies. The solution? Deceptive research practices. While deception should not be the sociologist's primary mode of research—in most settings, it is not even necessary—Douglas argues that it should not be ruled out as a strategy because for many scenes, it may be the only way to get at the facts of the case.

I agree with Humphreys (1970), most emphatically, when he says that protecting our respondents from harm is the researcher's primary interest. However, I also agree with him when he says that the ethics of social research must inevitably be situation ethics; even social scientists who proclaim absolutes betray them in actual practice. Exceptions and contingencies abound, and often derail even the most reasonable-sounding general formulations. Here, I intend to argue against Erikson's position on disguised observation and deception in research. More specifically, I intend to argue that it is ethical to engage in certain kinds of deception of the sort Erikson rules out of our legitimate research domain. I will insist that the ethics of disguised observation be evaluated on a situational, case-by-case basis, and that the ethics of a particular strategy cannot be determined in a blanket fashion. In specific social settings, some kinds of deception should be seen as entirely consistent with good ethics. I agree with Douglas: The facts of the case, in many instances, demand deception.

According to some of the criteria Erikson spelled out, I have been involved in an unethical research project. I used deception to gain unwar- ranted access to a set of research materials; I deliberately misrepresented what I was doing in order to get my hands on it. I obtained information under false pretenses; I wore a kind of disguise, pretending to be someone I was not. In fact, had I not been engaged in deception, not only would I
not have gained access to that material, it would not have existed in the first place; it was my deception that created the material. Moreover, I did not, as Long and Dorn's respondents advise, "provide full and detailed explanation" (1983: 295) to deceived subjects of what I did and why I did it. Here, I wish to argue that what seems to be—to some observers—an unethical research strategy should be regarded as entirely consistent with good ethics. (See Hilbert, 1980, for a discussion of the problems and logistics of covert participant observation.)

**RESEARCH ON PERSONAL ADVERTISEMENTS**

Hundreds, possibly thousands, of periodicals in North America, and probably at least as many in other countries around the world, carry a column in which advertisers request replies from potential dating or romantic partners. Although advertisers, and their respondents, are extremely varied as to motive and characteristics, most personal ads are written by heterosexual singles between the ages of 22 and 65 who at least claim to seek a long-term, marriage-oriented relationship.

The procedure for using personal ads as a means of meeting dating partners is essentially the same for all periodicals carrying such a column. The publication prints a series of ads, written by advertisers. Typically, the ads describe the characteristics (or putative characteristics) of the advertiser and describe one or more qualities or characteristics sought by the advertiser in a responder, that is, in a potential or ideal dating partner. Sometimes, the nature of the relationship desired will also be spelled out in the ad. Each ad includes a post office box number, which is held by the publication carrying the ad and/or a telephone code, again, controlled by the ad-bearing publication. (Home phone number and addresses are almost never published directly in personal ads.) The letters and/or calls will be forwarded to the subscriber, who then makes a decision as to which responses will be answered, if any. (Today, in most personal columns, voice mail is more likely to be used than written responses.) A number of manuals have been written explaining how to make maximum use of the personals as a source of dating and romantic partners (for instance, Beker & Rosenwald, 1985; Block 1984; Fox, 1982).

Personals-initiated courtship has one foot in public and one foot in private behavior. Thus, it does not fully qualify for Erikson's strictures, since he objected to deception for the purpose of "entering a private domain" (1967: 373). The initial stage of this process—placing or reading the personal ad itself—is distinctly public activity. It is a stage that anyone ca-
able of paying a fairly moderate fee can enter. And once an ad is placed, literally any literate human within the catchment area of a journal can inspect the ad’s declaration of preferences in a partner and claims as to the writer’s own qualities. But once the replies arrive, the locus of the courtship process shifts sharply from the public to the private domain. It is unlikely that Erikson had a scene in mind quite so bifurcated when he wrote about the ethics of entering a private domain. Placing a personal ad situates one squarely in the public domain; receiving replies to an ad places one squarely within the private domain. Courtship by means of personal ads is a scene that is extremely easy to enter—and extremely public—at its initial stage, yet difficult to enter—and very private—at its subsequent stages.

A substantial sociological and social-psychological literature exists which examines personal advertisements (or similar “formal intermediaries” or “mediated channels”) for dating and mate seeking. Many, probably most, of the writings that deal with personal advertisements are based on a content analysis of the ads themselves. (For a tiny sampling, consult Bolig, Stein, & McHenry, 1984; Deaux & Hanna, 1984; Montini & Ovrebo, 1990). One team of researchers took this process a step further and requested from the advertising journal a tally of the number of replies each ad received (Lynn & Shergot, 1984). To my knowledge, to date, only three social science research teams wrote directly to individuals who placed personal ads concerning the replies they received. In one of these studies, only 19 percent of ad placers responded to the questionnaire (Austrom & Kanel, 1983); in a second, the response rate was 45 percent for women and 36 percent for men (Rajecki, Bledsoe, & Rasmussen, 1991). A third, relying on less formal research methods, did not tally the response rate, but relied on a somewhat more daring research strategy: The researchers placed and answered personal ads themselves (Daren & Koski, 1988). One of the two researchers involved in this study responded to ads, placed several ads, receiving a number of replies—she answered a score of them—and talked with and even met in person several dating parties. All this activity was described as having been “conducted in good faith” (1988: 384), that is, presumably, it was at least partly for the purpose of meeting dating partners. The methodology of this research team is described as “ethnographic” (1988: 383); no systematic quantitative tabulations emerged from this study.

Prior to the research endeavor on which this paper is based, I requested information on replies to ads from the editors of a local newsletter specializing in publishing personal ads; I received no reply to my inquiries. At that point, I sent requests to individuals who placed ads in a particular personals column for information about replies they had received; my response rate was under 10 percent. The dismal results of my efforts led to the percent study.
While these past studies of personals-based courtship have taught us valuable lessons concerning one particular mode of dating and courtship, and possibly some aspects of dating and courtship in general, the researcher must feel constrained by the limitations of their methodologies. Examining personal advertisements is a completely unobtrusive technique; it is "naturalistic" behavior in which "subjects are not aware that they are being studied" (Lynn & Bolig, 1985: 379). One the other hand, one must wonder about the other actors in this scene who have not left permanent traces, specifically in the form of a newspaper or magazine ad. Are ad placers and responders complementary and reciprocal in crucial ways? Are they the same people, do they have similar characteristics, are they engaged in the same sort of partner-seeking activity, do they have the same motives? Requesting information from ad placers gives us a glimpse into a data source that might supply some answers to these questions, but it suffers from a possible problem of bias: Are the 20, 30, or 40 (or unknown) percent who answer the researcher's request for information similar in crucial ways to the 60, 70, or 80 percent who do not? Even participating in personal ad-based dating "in good faith" vitiates getting a broad cross-sectional view: Are partners one has chosen to date because of their appeal to us representative of participants in this scene generally?

Moreover, the endeavor of receiving information on responses to ads negates the value of the ads as unobtrusive instruments, since the avenue we must use to obtain this information may influence the answers we receive. (For instance, how many ad placers who received a humiliating zero responses to a particular advertisement will report that fact to an interviewer?) If we rely on information supplied by the venue in which the ads appear, how complete and detailed can we expect that information to be? So far, social science researchers have requested only fairly simple tallies from the ad-bearing journals. Journalists and other non-social science students and observers of personal ads have not been quite so timid, it must be said. Foxman, author of a guidebook to the personals (1982), admitted to placing deceptive ads exclusively for the purpose of reporting on the letters she received. One ad ("Married woman [early 30s] looking for discrete playmate") received over 2,000 replies (1982: 58).

After exhausting the potential of the currently available research strategies, the researcher yearns for more complete access to information concerning the personals-generated courtship and dating processes. Berger reminds us that sociologists tend to be seized by the voyeuristic impulse; what interests us is the voices behind the closed door. We want to "open that door, to understand those voices. Behind each closed door," Berger says, we will "anticipate some new facet of human life not yet perceived and understood" (1963: 19).
METHODS

Frustrated by the limitations of the currently available research techniques, and intrigued by the voices behind that closed door, I decided to place bogus ads in several journals which carry personal columns. I reasoned that, if they were realistic enough, they would attract responses that were representative, reflective of responses to genuine ads, and uncontaminated by the method by which I generated them. Since the most commonly-verified generalization in the literature is that ads placed by men seek women who are attractive and offer financial success, while ads placed by women seek financially successful males and offer attractiveness (for instance, Hirschman, 1987), I decided to use this angle as a point of entry. (I focused exclusively on heterosexual ads, reasoning that the dimension of sexual orientation would have introduced more complexity into the research than I was willing to grapple with at present.)

I placed four ads in four different periodicals, published in separate geographical locales, which carry personal advertisements; hence, a total of 16 ads appeared. The wording in the four ads was almost identical except for the two crucial variables. (I did vary the wording very slightly to avoid arousing the suspicion of responders.) One ad referred to a beautiful waitress; she was intended to present to ad readers and responders a potential date who ranked high on physical attractiveness and low on financial success. Another ad referred to a successful female lawyer who was “average” in appearance, that is, a woman who ranks considerably lower in attractiveness, but considerably higher in economic success, than the waitress. A third ad referred to a handsome taxicab driver, who ranked high in attractiveness and low in success. And the fourth ad referred to an average-looking male lawyer, who ranked lower in looks and higher in success than the cab driver. I decided to request written replies rather than voice mail because the former represent a permanent record; written replies are easier to examine, consult, and handle. In addition, photographs (which were not requested) can accompany written responses, but not telephone messages. I present the findings of this study, and a justification of the ads, in another publication.

There were, of course, no actual persons behind these ads; I placed them myself for the purpose of studying the responses they elicited. Hence, deception was involved in this study.

IS PLACING A BOGUS PERSONAL AD UNETHICAL?

Erikson (1967) argues that, as a general rule, research based on access to a particular scene through the use of deception, as well as misrepresen-
tation of that research to the subjects of study, should be regarded as unethical. Addressing specifically the issue of research on personal ads, Lynn and Bolig speculate that "investigators may place ads and evaluate the responses that they receive" (1985: 382); however, they add, such a research strategy is generally unethical.... People who respond to these ads expect to be evaluated by a potential partner. Placing personal ads for research purposes violates these expectations and imposes numerous costs on unwilling subjects" (1985: 383). They mention handling fees that some publications charge for answering personal ads; since I purposely did not place an ad in any publications charging such a fee, this cost is not relevant here. Lynn and Bolig also mention postage costs (at the time of the research, a 29-cent stamp) and writing time. In discussing the drawbacks of this strategy, Lynn and Bolig also claim, without presenting their reasoning, that its utility is "limited," and that the similar wording of parallel ads is likely to arouse suspicion. Judging by their replies, the suspicion of none of the nearly 1,000 responders was aroused—although ad readers who were suspicious might simply not have responded. (Two men did express strong doubts that, given that she relied on personal ads to find a date, the waitress really was as beautiful as she claimed.) And I hope that the utility of the research design will be demonstrated by the related papers that issue from this research. I intend to defend the ethics of a research strategy which entails placing a bogus ad in a personal column for the purpose of analyzing the responses this generates, as well as to defend deception in social research situationally, that is, under specific, delimited circumstances.

As I see it, there are several separate issues to consider when discussing the question of the ethics of disguised or deceptive methods in social research; I would like to discuss two: risk and exploitation. (A third issue, the uses to which the results of the study will be put, while important, is not unique to research techniques which rely on deception or disguised observation.) In addition, and in conjunction with risk, I discuss the question of violating the integrity of a particular scene and offending our informants, issues Erikson deems crucial.

RISK

Erikson distinguishes risk to informants, risk to graduate student researchers, and risk to the profession. He is both wrong and right in his discussion of risk to informants. Insofar as nothing in life is predictable, by definition, the researcher can "injure people in ways we can neither anticipate in advance nor compensate for afterward" (1967: 368). On the other hand, any knowledgeable participant observer in every group or set-
ting has some notion of the possible consequences of his or her actions. We ought to know that certain consequences to specific actions are highly likely and others are extremely unlikely. All of us have read textbooks and manuals on field methods and participant observation. All of us have some sense of the social and cultural texture of the groups and scenes we are investigating. Do we expose our subjects to some measure of risk simply by interacting with them, by nosing around their everyday affairs? Of course we do; as Humphreys says, "any conceivable [research] method... has at least some potential for harming others" (1970: 169). Whenever humans interact with one another, some measure of risk is involved. Are the risks that flow from pretending to be something one is not qualitatively different from those entailed by the behavior we enact in our own circles, in everyday life? I suspect the reverse is the case. It is entirely possible that deep, primary, genuine first-hand involvement with a scene lends a certain confidence to social actors that permit them to involve others in risk. In contrast, adopting a bogus membership in a scene is likely to generate a measure of timidity that mitigates against taking certain actions as excessively risky. While not all risks can be predicted many can, and the wise covert field-worker is not likely to take the worst of them. In any case, this is an empirical question, isn't it? Why should our feelings about the ethics of fieldwork get rolled up into our predictions of the empirical likelihood of risk? Moreover, it seems to me that Erikson is not discussing ethics so much as sociological incompetence. Any damn fool who does not know enough about the scene under investigation to avoid serious risk—again, statistically, not absolutely, speaking—to his or her subjects does not belong in the field of sociology.

But the interface of ethics and risk cuts both ways (if I may be permitted a mixed metaphor). The very same action which is seen as ethical in one circle may seem unethical in another. It is arrogant for sociologists to assume that our (that is, sociological) ethics are identical with our subjects' ethics. It is, in fact, entirely possible, in insisting on being sociologically ethical, we may harm our subjects by doing something they consider, if not unethical, then either just plain stupid or risky for their own values. During 1982-1983, Mario Brajuha, then a graduate student in sociology, worked as a waiter in a restaurant to earn his way through school. During this time, he took field notes as a participant observer, intending to write his doctoral dissertation on "the dining experience." In March, 1983, a fire of suspicious origin destroyed the restaurant. The Suffolk County District Attorney's office, believing that the owners had arranged to torch the building to collect the insurance money, demanded that Brajuha surrender his field notes. He refused, insisting that he had promised to protect the identity of his informants. Brajuha was forced to go to trial, first in a county case
and later in a federal case, to keep his field notes from the gaze of authorities. These cases dragged on for nearly two years before the charges were eventually dropped.

Ironically, Brajura’s refusal to give up his field notes to the authorities may have had an unintended impact on the very individuals he sought to protect, that is, his informants. Because the investigation was based on suspected arson, the insurance company refused to pay the owner’s claim. Consequently, the owners could not rebuild the restaurant. As a result, the employees who worked for the restaurant were either unemployed or had to seek work in less desirable, less remunerative jobs. Far from appreciating his efforts, the restaurant’s former employees, its owners, and their financial partners deeply resented Brajura’s stubbornness. They felt that his refusal to turn over his field notes was based on trivial, academic, and esoteric notions. As a result, after being a trusted insider for so long, he became an outsider, a “problem person,” a persona non grata. Moreover, because he found himself shunned socially within the restaurant business, he found it extremely difficult to get another waiting job during the two years he spent defending his case (Brajura & Hallowell, 1986). This is not a case of disguised observation, of course, nor is it a question of an outsider faking the accouterments of a particular scene. What we have here is a case of harm being inflicted on subjects as a consequence of a conflict between sociological ethics and local ethics. Brajura could have foreseen the consequences of his participation in a particular setting, but it was not because he employed deception, and it was not because he lacked an insider’s knowledge of the scene; it was because he followed sociological ethics—and, in so doing, violated local ethics.

Are we really talking about the likelihood of harm when we discuss risk? If we are, in my study—unlike Humphreys’—there was no conceivable possibility of harm. No respondent could have been arrested or faced the risk of any of the more serious forms of harm we can imagine that might result from social research in certain scenes by being unwittingly dragged into my research project. On the other hand, what about less serious forms of harm? Specially, what about the risk of exposure and the possibility of embarrassment and humiliation? What if, as a result of answering one of my ads, persons whom one of my respondents knew found out that he or she was seeking a date through personal advertisements? What embarrassing revelations were exposed in his or her letter, meant only for the eyes of the (in reality, fictive) advertiser? What about the married respondents who sought “discreet” afternoon liaisons? Of course, I read all the letters and notes; this was unavoidable. By the very nature of the research, my knowledge of their participation and revelations was inevitable. In addition, several graduate and undergraduate research assistants coded a number of
these letters; and the members of my "panel of judges," to be explained shortly, read the letters. I did take one precaution: When I handed the members of the panel the letters to read, I had blocked out key identifying details—name, address, telephone numbers, etc. I did not do this for my coders, however.

Whenever I could, I minimized the risk of exposure by having members of my panel of judges who live in one venue reading letters that were generated by journals which were published in a different venue. All the female members of my panel of judges lived in venue number one, while all (but a few) of the male responders to the female ads whose letters the female panel read lived in venues three and four; hence, they were extremely unlikely to have been acquainted with them. I was not able to do this with the female letters, however. (And I did not attempt to do this venue juggling at all, obviously, for my research assistants.) Ethically, this is the only aspect of the research about which I feel in the slightest bit uncomfortable. In any case, no research assistant said that he or she knew any of the responders; one member of my panel of judges stated that he thought one of the respondents looked familiar. Was the privacy of my respondents violated? Yes and no. A small number of individuals, including myself, read their notes and letters—which were intended for someone else, and for an entirely different purpose. On the other hand, none of us (with one possible exception) was personally acquainted with the subjects and no one was therefore able to link up what they said in their responses with a real person in the concrete world. Thus, their anonymity—and, I am satisfied, their essential privacy—was preserved.

Violating the Integrity of a Scene

Did I violate the integrity of this scene? It seems to me that Erikson is really discussing a philosophical and esthetic issue, not one of empirical physical or social harm to informants. Erikson seems to believe that groups, scenes, and subcultures in this society are so isolated and radically different from the mainstream culture that they constitute altogether different social worlds, worlds whose values, norms, and lifeways are hidden even from the gaze of the inquisitive fieldworker. And that these lifeways are so deeply ingrained that they cannot be convincingly faked. Erikson's model adheres to the view that being a member of one of these scenes entails something of a full-time commitment. For most sociological scenes—certainly not all—I question Erikson's characterization. In fact, most scenes are not made up of participants who are devoted full-time to it. In many—perhaps most—sociological scenes we're likely to study, participants flit in and out, devot-
ing only a segment of their lives to the scene. Most sociological scenes are not like small tribal societies half-way around the world from us. Most participants in the worlds we are likely to study have one foot in the social and cultural mainstream and the other in a scene that bears major similarities to the cultural mainstream. (This is both an empirical question and a matter of degree, of course.) In most cases, we can fake the trappings of the scene because it isn’t that different from the ones in which we are already involved.

In learning about particular scenes, all participant observers commit gaffes and blunders; it is one way we learn the configurations of the scene under study. Thus, even the mistakes Erikson claims that disguised observers are likely to make can be productive in that they represent a learning experience. Still, much covert work in groups in which the intruder is not a genuine member demonstrates that evidence of membership can be successfully reproduced. Undercover agents, spies, and investigative journalists manage to fake participation convincingly in many scenes without arousing suspicion. (For a discussion of what we can learn from private detective work, see Shulman, 1994.) The ethical question of whether we have the same right to do this as these shady operators do is, again, a completely separate issue. Moreover, most scenes permit the role of neophyte, learner, or convert, who is permitted mistakes. Once again, Erikson has attempted to smuggle empirical questions into an essentially ethical issue. Can insider membership and participation be faked? With varying degrees of success, of course they can! Is this a violation of the integrity of the scene under study? I can’t answer that; it’s a matter of opinion. It seems to me that we should not roll the one question up into the other.

Consider the scene in which I have been interested. For a period of roughly three years in the late 1970’s and early 1980s, I was an active and genuine participant in a scene in which dating and courtship was made possible as a consequence of reading, answering, and placing personal advertisements. During this period of time, I answered perhaps three dozen ads, and placed one; I had at least one date with some two dozen women as a result of my participation in the personal ads. In fact, it was partly a result of my participation in personal ads that led to my interest, a decade later, in studying it as a form of dating and courtship. I did not “wear a disguise exactly because” I was entering a social sphere “so far from” my own experience (Erikson, 1967: 368). In fact, the reverse was true: I was successful at wearing a particular disguise which enabled me to enter a social sphere precisely because I had been intimate with that social sphere, because it was part of my own personal experience 10 or more years earlier. My particular form of “imitation” was successful; as I said above, judging from the evidence in the nearly one thousand letters I received, little or
no "subliminal suspicion" seems to have been aroused. Again, this scene was not the sort of social circle that demands full-time, lifelong membership. Participants continually enter and leave it; in fact, they enter it in order to leave it and re-enter the mainstream. My genuine participation in it gave me enough insider's information so that I was capable of engaging in a form of disguised observation.

Offending Informants

It seems to me that Erikson and other blanket opponents of disguised observation are mixing up genuine risk of physical and social damage to our subjects with offending them. Erikson tells us that fraud is "painful to the people who are misled"; it can "cause discomfort" and "distress" (1967: 368). Does that mean that social researchers are ethically obliged to avoid doing anything that causes "distress" and "discomfort" to the people they study? It seems to me that field workers, journalists, biographers, and other portrayals of social life almost inevitably find that the very practice of their craft results in offense to their subjects. If the sociologist is completely honest, somebody is going to get hurt. There is no way within the boundaries of legitimate social research to produce results that all or even most subjects will be happy with. It is the ethical researcher who is forced to cause distress to his or her subjects, who will almost always dislike the portrait that is drawn of them.

While respondents, interviewees, and subjects resent being deceived, their discomfort is most likely to be generated when the sociologist (or journalist) is on his or her most ethical behavior. I refer of course to reporting a study's findings honestly. The subjects of a study do not wish to see themselves in any but the most flattering light. They want to read a puff piece, analogous to the legal document drawn up by a lawyer on behalf of either the plaintiff or the defendant in a lawsuit. They want to be described by an advocate, not a hard-nosed, inquisitive, skeptical sociologist (again, or journalist). Self-love, not ethics, lies behind subjects typical reactions to seeing descriptions of themselves in print. Says journalist Janet Malcolm: "Of pleasurable reading experiences there may be none greater than that afforded by a legal document written on one's behalf.... The world of the lawsuit is the world of the Platonic ideal, where all is clear, etched, one thing or the other" (1990: 148, 149). William Foote Whyte's visit to "Cornerville" after his book, Stress Corner Society, was published makes the obverse of this point most emphatically. Nearly all Whyte's streetcorner boys were made uncomfortable by reading his portrayal of them and their community. Said "Chick," a key informant: "The trouble is, Bill, you caught
the people with their hair down. It's a true picture, yes; but people feel it's a little too personal" (1955: 347).

Complex portrayals of real people in the real world offer a view most subjects are likely to experience as betrayal—betrayal not so much because details of the portrait are empirically false as a "warts and all" image is the last thing the subject wants presented to the reading public. (Malcolm also goes on to argue that the—factually accurate—things the journalist writes are experienced as a kind of ultimate betrayal by the subject specifically because the former has simulated an equalitarian pseudo-friendship with the latter in order to extract information, which is then transformed into the "warts and all" portrayal that is experienced as unflattering.) Please note: the subject wants to read a flattering portrayal, not an accurate one. A research report's lack of flattery is what is most likely to cause pain and discomfort, not the practice of deception the researcher may have used to gather information.

Indeed, it is mainly because portrayal is less than completely complimentary that deception becomes an issue in the first place. Deception is experienced as offensive specifically because the researcher has discovered—again, empirically accurate—facts the subject does not wish to be conveyed to the public. Even when technical deception is not employed, complete honesty of necessity represents a kind of deception in that a contract of dishonesty is implied in intimacy. If informants let a researcher—or, for that matter, a friend or acquaintance—into their lives, it is implicitly understood that he or she will not report certain discrediting information. The issue of unwarranted access cannot be separated from the implicit contract understood by all intimates. The honest sociologist must betray informants.

EXPLOITATION

Anyone interested in the ethics of disguised observation must grapple with the issue of exploitation. Here, we are concerned with the question of cost (as opposed to danger or risk). That is, should we condone having our informants on the cheap? Have we asked them to expend resources—an action they otherwise would have been reluctant to undertake—which will result in no recompense to themselves? Much social research demands time and other resources from informants, of course, with little or no payoff to them, other than the gratification of participating in a study or, much later on, reading about a scene in which they are involved. (In fact, by federal law, the United States census demands this expenditure of its citizens.) But deception demands that informants expend those resources under false pretenses. In most interview, questionnaire, experimental, or field
situations, respondents know they will not compensated. Disguised obser-
vation either does not make that clear or even (as with mine) seems to 
extend an offer which will not be forthcoming. As Lynn and Bolig (1985: 
383) point out, answering a bogus personal ad places “costs” on responders; 
they spend the time and effort answering an ad with no possible chance 
of actually getting a date. How serious are these costs? How much of an 
investment do personal ad responders make to get a date? And what is 
the likely reward in responding to a personal ad?

To begin with, a date is far from certain even when answering a genu-
ine personal advertisement. Rajeciki, Bledsoe, and Rasmussen (1991) sent 
a questionnaire to ad placers to inquire about the responses they received. 
Women reported an average of 26 replies; men said that they received an 
average of 15 replies. (The newspaper in which the ads were placed reports 
a slightly lower tally of the replies, 22 and 12.) As a result of each adver-
tisement, ad placers actually ended up going out on a total of slightly less 
than two dates for both women and men (1991: 464). Hence, the odds that 
a given response resulted in a date were 7 percent for women and 13 per-
cent for men. (Or 9 and 16 percent, if we accept the newspaper’s tally of 
the replies these ads received.) Thus, my ruse lowered the respondent’s 
odds, in this effort, from a bit more than one in 10 to zero.

Moreover, something of a quota system operates here; this is true for 
both ad placers and ad responders. It is not the number of (potential) dates 
that is relevant here, but the number of acceptable dates. Ad placers “rank-
order incoming replies. Meetings are then arranged with a few respondents 
who have the highest apparent potential” (1991: 467). If one or more of 
these meetings proved to be successful, contacts with other parties are not 
arranged “because the writer’s short-term social needs are met” (1991: 467). 
On the other hand, if these meetings produce no viable dating partners, 
little further effort will be made, since “the writer is already disappointed 
by the best candidates” (1991: 467). Thus, it is important to stress that fact 
that subtracting or multiplying responses to ads is not, strictly speaking, a 
zero sum game. By requesting a response which has no likelihood of gener-
ating a counter-response, I did not subtract by one (or two, if the re-
sponder answered both ads) that person’s likelihood of getting a date, since 
it is not the total number of counter-responses that determines when the 
responder decides to stop writing, but the number of acceptable dates. The 
only resource of any consequence I took from responders was time.

It would be instructive to consider the question of the amount of time 
that responders invested in the endeavor of writing replies to these ads. I 
operationalized the concept of “minimalism”—a respondent putting an ab-
solute minimal effort into answering an ad—as engaging in one of five ac-
tions. Minimalism is defined as sending to the advertiser: (a) a sheet of
memo paper with nothing more than a name (first only or first and last) and a telephone number and/or an address and/or a post office box, (b) a business card; (c) a Xerox copy of a generic all-purpose letter not written in response to the ad or ads in question; (d) a computer-generated generic, all-purpose letter; or (e) a hand-written note containing 25 words or less. If a note or letter of more than 25 words was attached or added to or written on any of (a) through (d), it did not qualify as a minimalist effort. Only 11 of the 79 women (or, more properly, as we'll see shortly, responses) who answered my male ads, or 14 percent, were minimalists: They sent in responses that were other than, and in fact, considerably less than, personal letters. In contrast, 79 out of the 240 responses to the female lawyer ad (or 33 percent) and 171 of the 668 responses to the waitress ad (26 percent) were minimalist in nature—overall, twice the frequency as the men (28 versus 14 percent). While the overwhelming majority of the women, and a clear majority of the men, put in more than a minimal effort to answer my ads, a substantial minority of the men at least, did not.

All manuals instructing placers of personal ads warn that minimalists are likely to be "blitzers"—that is, someone who puts in a minimal effort in responding to a personal ad is highly likely to send out many replies on an indiscriminate basis rather than a few on a selective, discriminating basis (Foxman, 1982; Block, 1984; Beker & Rosenwald, 1985). Since each of my sets of ads contained two that were strikingly different, I made the assumption that any responder who answered both was a "blitzer," that is, sent responses to a number of ads in addition to the two I placed. (Foxman, 1982: 104, Block, 1984: 113, and Beker & Rosenwald, 1985: 52-53, all make this assumption.) According to the criterion of sending a response to both the cabdriver and the lawyer ads, only three of the women who replied were blitzers (4 percent); thus, the 79 responses represent 76 women. In contrast, 104 of the male responders sent in responses to both the waitress and the lawyer; this means that our 908 male responses represent 805 responders, of whom 13 percent were "blitzers." Even if most of our 800-plus men wrote individually crafted letters, enough of them sent a multiple replies for us to conclude that a significant minority did not give much thought or feeling to their responses.

**THE PANEL OF JUDGES**

How many of the replies I received were sent by persons who should have sent them in the first place? How many were realistic partners of my hypothetical ad placers? Were these individuals engaged in reasonable, practical, rational courtship, or were they acting out a fantasy courtship
with someone who, in reality, would not even have considered dating them? How many were doing the same thing with other, highly desirable parties? If they had little or no chance of getting a date from my hypothetical ad placers, what exactly was I taking from them? Should they have responded in the first place?

To address these questions, I assembled a "panel of judges" (a kind of "convenience" or "opportunity" sample) of 20 persons to determine whether the ad placers would be likely to respond to the individuals who answered their ads. Half the members of this panel were women and half were men; half were professionals or professionals in training, half were non-professionals. All the professionals or professionals in training were college graduates; none of the non-professionals were college graduates. Their ages fell five years on either side of the ages of the ad placers (which were 30 for the women, 32 for the men), that is, 25 to 35 for the women, 27 to 37 for the men. I showed each member of the panel the two same-sex ads and a file of opposite-sex respondents' letters or notes and photographs; each panel member was shown a file of 10 responses. Women panel members were shown male responses to female ads, men members were shown female responses to male ads. The male responses were selected randomly anew for each female panel member. (Half had been sent to the waitress ad and half to the lawyer ad.) In contrast, the female responses were the only 10 I received with a clear color photograph accompanying the letter or note; hence, while each woman panel member reviewed a random shuffle of male responses, all male panel members reviewed the same 10 female responses. As I said above, I blocked out all names, addresses, telephone numbers, and other specific identifying information.

**Evaluation of Respondents as Dates**

All panel members were informed as to the bogus nature of the ad. Each was asked to read the ad placed by the two parties of their own sex. They were then asked the following question: "Try to picture what he/she is like and what sort of woman/man he/she is probably advertising for and wants to go out on a date with. Now, imagine that he/she receives a number of replies. Let's say that one of the replies he/she receives is from this woman/man. Here's her/his photograph and here's her/his letter. Now, what do you think the chances are that the man/woman who placed the ad you read would want to go out with this woman/man? Why do you think this is the case?" I asked each female panel member to rate this likelihood for responses to both the waitress and the female lawyers ads. (I tallied these responses separately.) Eight of the women's responses were written to the
male lawyer ad, and two were sent to the cabdriver ad. I divided panelists' judgments into three categories—the hypothetical ad placer would probably get in touch with the responder, that is, there was more than a 50/50 chance; there was roughly a 50/50 chance of this happening; and getting a date was not very likely, that is, there was less than a 50/50 chance.

Only one-third of the judgements made by the female panelists (10 panelists evaluating 10 respondents) assessing whether the hypothetical ad placer would make an effort to date the respondents who wrote to their ad—33 percent for the waitress, 38 percent for the lawyer—answered in the affirmative. In contrast, the male panelists were much more sanguine about the male respondent's chances of getting a date with the fictive ad placer: Eight out of ten of the judgments concerning the respondents' chance of getting a date with the cabdriver were positive (80 percent), and over half (56 percent) of the judgements on the respondents' getting a date with the male lawyer were positive. In short, in only a minority of the time, female panel members say that the female ad placers have a better than 50/50 chance of making an effort to date the male respondents who answered the ads. In contrast, female respondents were said to have a better chance; more than half of my male panelists said that there was a 50/50 chance that the male ad placers would make an attempt to go out with the female respondents. In no case did a specific respondent elicit universal agreement among all 10 of any opposite-sex panel members that a date with the ad placer was certain or even probable.

The point is, of course, that getting a date with someone who places an ad is far from a guarantee. To judge from my panel members, in the case of women who place ads, getting a date is something of a long shot; only one out of three men who responded to my ads were judged worthy of dating the women who, supposedly, placed the ads. Were the men who responded plausible candidates for the women to whom they wrote? In the view of my panelists, in most instances, no. In the language of exchange theory, were many of these men attempting to enter into an exploitative bargain, that is, to obtain more reward than they had the resources to command? For a substantial proportion of my respondents, yes, that is the case. Of course, this does not apply to most female respondents and to many male respondents but it does, in some measure, apply to most of my respondents.

**Ethical Judgments**

In addition to asking my panel members to evaluate responders to the ads as potential dates for the men and women described in those ads, I also asked them about the ethics of my research endeavor. I asked two
questions: “Do you think that deception in social research is unethical?” And: “Do you think the methods I used in this study were unethical?”

Only two of my 20 panel members of both sexes said, without qualification, that my study was unethical. One 34-year-old professional woman said, “I feel bad for the people who wrote. Because, even though they don’t get responses from many people, each no response has an effect.” The others divided evenly between those who said the research methods I used were clearly not unethical (9 panelists) and those who were ambivalent about the issue (9 panelists).

Those who were ambivalent expressed both positive and negative aspects to the research; for the most part, they couched their views in terms of situation ethics: In the abstract, deception is undesirable, but if no harm comes to the respondents, and some benefit results in the form of an addition to knowledge, then a study does more good than harm. In the case of this study, to these respondents, the risk seems small and the pay-off, they assumed, worthwhile. Another 34-year-old professional woman explained her views in the following words: “You don’t really affect their lives all that much.... Maybe being unethical sometimes is OK. Well, yeah, it’s unethical—I mean, you’re lying—but it’s OK. As I’m thinking through it, yeah, it’s totally unethical, but it’s OK. It’s an acceptable thing to do. You’re doing research, you’re trying to gather information. You’re not really hurting anybody. Besides, how else could you do it? You really couldn’t get this information any other way.... You’re trying to look into human nature and learn about people.”

The remaining panel members expressed the view, without qualification, that the study was not unethical; they denied that harm was a realistic possibility and saw only benefits from the study. Some justified their position by stating that certain other methods would definitely be unethical, but not this one. For instance, if I were to actually set up or got out on dates with the respondents and study their behavior in some way, this would be unacceptable; in comparison, this study’s methodology they said, was positively pristine. A 35-year-old mail sorter and deliverer told me: “do I think that what you’re doing is unethical? No, not really.... I assume it’s a bona fide study. But if you were to answer these ads and go out with these women and, just as you’re walking down the aisle, you say, oh, by the way, I’m married, I’m just doing a study—that would be unethical.” Several other panelists stated that answering ads to gather information would definitely be unethical.

Some panel members justified the study’s methods by pointing to the world of dating by means of singles ads; it is, by its very nature, a world of deception and chance-taking; no one is assured of a date by writing a response to an ad, some said, nor that the contents of the ad are truthful.
The ads are not very revealing or communicative, several panel members added: how could such uncommunicative ads generate realistic hope in any respondents? Said a 30-year-old professional woman: “If these ads were more communicative, I might think it was unethical. But the fact that the ads are so uncommunicative and nondescript, so generic, means that it’s hard to imagine someone having his heart set on who’s behind this particular ad. But these ads could be almost anybody.” These panelists did not dismiss the issue of harm to research subjects generally as trivial. All either admitted that deception in social research posed a genuine problem whose harm and benefits had to be weighed carefully—or segued directly from the general question to a consideration of this particular study. But this study, they argued, posed no risk of harm to my respondents. “No harm, no foul,” seemed to be their refrain.

CODA

Did I corrupt any graduate students by involving them in the research, either as a researcher assistant or as a member of the panel of judges? Were they placed in an ethically compromising position by engaging in coding or judging the quality of the responders as dates? Life generally and social research specifically inevitably entail making judgements in morally ambiguous situations. To pretend otherwise is naive. In all phases of this research, I told graduate students that I’m doing what I think is best; it’s their choice as to whether they wish to collude in an endeavor they may have reservations about. Moreover, everyone associated with this study was able to make a distinction between involvement in one or another phase of this study and approval of my research strategy. In fact, of the graduate students I talked to, one particular research assistant, who was the most involved in various phases of the research, expressed the most critical views concerning the ethics of the research. My position on the matter and his involvement in the project did not alter his judgement one whit: Even though he worked for me and knew my position on the issue, he nonetheless regarded deception in social research to be unethical. Graduate assistants are capable of thinking for themselves, and my experience with this project demonstrates that fact.

Not only did Erikson overstate the naivete, vulnerability, and malleability of graduate assistants on this issue, but his reasoning is also circular. Involving graduate assistants in deception is unethical because their involvement in an ethically questionable endeavor may corrupt them. But to accept this reasoning, we have to accept the fact that deception in social research is ethically questionable in the first place. In my view, carefully and sensi-
tively used, deception is not unethical and hence, it does corrupt graduate assistants to involve them in a project which makes use of it.

Did I place any ongoing or future sociological research—either on personal advertisements or in general—in jeopardy by engaging in deceptive practices? I hope not. It is a troubling question for me. I strongly believe every society deserves a skeptical, inquiring, tough-minded, challenging sociological community. It is one of the obligations of such a society to nurture such a community and to tolerate occasional intrusions by its members into the private lives of its citizens. (See Scarce’s discussion, 1994, on a parallel issue, the matter of confidentiality.) When one of these intrusions takes place, its citizens may become resentful and make later sociological research more difficult. I have no problem with the ethics of the occasional deceptive prying and intruding that some sociologists do. I approve of it as long as no one’s safety is threatened. My problem is a tactical and empirical one: Does this make further prying and intruding problematic?

I don’t think any of us can answer this question, but I do not believe that one sociologist’s research should be foreclosed because it has the potential for making another sociologist’s possible future research more difficult. If this is a criterion for the viability of a specific line of research, then we must consider additional possible sources of public and official antagonism to sociological research: the religious right’s opposition to studies on sexual attitudes and behavior, leftish views which hold that even engaging in certain inquiries is politically incorrect, hostility by the police to an investigation of brutality and corruption in their ranks, and so on. Can it be that certain reasons which pose a possible threat to future research meet with our approval while others do not? Would any among us expect a sociologist of sex to avoid doing a study which is likely to draw controversial conclusions because it might antagonize the public and endanger the work of future sociologists on the subject? (And of what value would that work be if it avoided controversy?) I certainly do not want to make any colleagues’ future research more difficult, but I do not wish to close down my research endeavors because they may object to my violating an article of ethics they believe in but I don’t.

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