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Niklas Luhmann and the Problem of Ethnographic Observation

There is little appreciation of Niklas Luhmann's theory of society among traditional ethnographers. If "qualitative" sociologists ever mention his work, they tend to criticize Luhmann for not conducting empirical investigations. They ask, "Where do people appear in his work? Did he never get out of his office and observe society?" This is an unfortunate and shallow dismissal. In this paper, I focus on two aspects of Luhmann's work that can substantially improve the scientific quality of ethnographic research. First, I assert that while ethnographers have amassed hundreds of fascinating "stories of the social" based on data collected as participant observers; they have consistently failed to articulate an explicit *theory of observation*. Luhmann extended ideas from Fritz Heider and George Spencer Brown to build a powerful theoretical account of what it means to observe, both as a native and as a sociologist. In the second part of the paper, I refer to my own ethnographic work to show how Luhmann's treatment of *society as communication* helps focus attention on the problem of how communication processes meaning to organize, condition, and reduce the complexity of actors, making society possible. I conclude that it is precisely Luhmann's theory of observing communication that can contribute sociological relevance to ethnography. Learning from Luhmann, a reflexive participant observer may achieve the disciplined self-control necessary to turn notes from the field into recognizable science. Luhmann may truly have been uninterested in conducting fieldwork, but his theory of observation solves a basic problem of ethnography.