

Center for Ethnography Para-Site Report:

The “parole” para-site

The following report represents my reflections on the para-site experiment that I helped organize on January 12, 2008. In conjunction with Drs. George Marcus and Justin Richland, this para-site grew out of my previous and on-going research on parole in the State of California. The event was attended by approximately 20 individuals: 9 individuals who were all parole personnel employed by California’s Division of Adult Parole Operations (DAPO) (including parole field agents, supervisors, and “Parole Agents 2’s” who work in administration or programming for DAPO) and 11 individuals associated with the University of California, Irvine (consisting of a mix of professors and graduate students from a variety of disciplines). The 9 individuals from DAPO were organized by Thomas¹ and (indirectly) myself. Thomas is a DAPO employee who I have known and who has worked with and assisted me while I conducted research for several years. When I approached Thomas about the idea of a parole para-site or workshop, he was both receptive and very enthusiastic about the idea. He took the lead on locating and inviting the other individuals who worked for DAPO, which included people who work in various capacities within parole – field agents, supervisors, administrative duties, programming (i.e., locating and contracting with outside service providers who provide ‘programs’ to individuals on parole).

In addition to providing reflections and insights about the para-site event itself, this report will examine the process of planning for and putting together the para-site, which

¹ The names of research collaborators from DAPO have been changed to pseudonyms.

represented a continuation – and an extension – of my existing fieldwork in this area. Examining the ‘process’ of bringing the para-site to fruition, as well as the ‘results’, will help showcase how this experiment was another venue for fieldwork as well as an intervention at a particular moment in my dissertation research.

Background: Envisioning a para-site or, what was ‘my’ para-site?

As Justin Richland noted in his abstract about para-site experiments, the parole para-site was an intervention at a particular moment in my fieldwork (as well as a continuation, an extension, of fieldwork). Part of the idea behind this event, for me, was that parole agents and myself shared an interest in studying, understanding and ‘knowing’ parolees. In different ways, parolees represented our shared ‘subject’. As such, engaging in “a kind of shared conceptual labor with our collaborator-subjects” (Richland 2008) seemed particularly promising. As Jesse Cheng noted, in relation to the para-site he organized (“Methods of Humanization”), successful field collaborations are dependent, at least to a degree, on a “sense of shared engagement.” The “parole parasite” was based, in large part, on the sense that such a sense of shared engagement was present.

Further, my current (dissertation) research is focused upon parole agents and supervisors who themselves are continually analyzing and reflecting on their day to day interactions with parolees. Following Holmes and Marcus’ (2005) writing on para-ethnography, the para-site was a productive context to explicitly engage with the forms of inquiry, analysis and knowledge production of my informants. Such practices often mirror the “form and content of an ethnographic engagement with the world” (26) and the para-site provided an opportunity to make

this parallels explicit, to question them, and to probe the possibilities and limits of collaboration as an orienting practice for contemporary ethnography.

The para-site event proceeded with me unsure of a central topic or specific questions. Prior to the para-site, most of my fieldwork had involved working with individuals on parole, not with parole agents. However, I had conducted some preliminary fieldwork (interviews and observation) with parole agents and personnel. The para-site event occurred at a very specific, and I believe, very fortuitous moment in my project. It afforded an opportunity, at the very early stages of fieldwork, to generate a conversation (and a set of relations) with parole personnel that allowed - and encouraged – me to think together with them about the field of parole. While previous research and literature about parole, as well as relevant theoretical work, has been important, the para-site presented an opportunity to allow parole agents to guide, direct and orient my attention to things they see as important.

In my initial formulations, I was interested in jointly interrogating the knowledge production practices of parole agents. More specifically, the parolee – parole agent relationship that is central to the functioning of parole. Parole agents supervise and evaluate the conduct of parolees, engaging in activities such as determining the risk and supervision level of parolees, deciding upon the conditions of parole, and ascertaining if individuals are complying with these requirements. I was interested in looking at questions that related to how parole agents go about these tasks and how they assess risk and come to understand if a person is ‘complying’ with the rules. Compliance, in particular, seemed like an important topic/concept to jointly interrogate. Compliance had already arisen from my field material (with both individuals on parole and DAPO personnel) as an important arena. I found in the literature a considerable amount of

concern, tension and even confusion around rule compliance (and assessing compliance). For instance, how does someone on parole understand a given rule, and how do they go about enacting this rule (in a specific context). Further, how does this person perceive or anticipate how their parole agent will understand and enforce this rule, and ‘judge’ their conduct in relation to this rule. Through the para-site and DAPO’s genuine curiosity about the event, the para-site opened short windows of opportunity to hold a two way discussion about how parole personnel understand rules and envision compliance. It was two-way because although DAPO personnel were informants/experts, they were timidly probed by the audience, and to a certain extent by myself, in relation to their views on compliance issues. For instance, what knowledge is necessary to evaluate someone’s conduct? How do agents go about determining compliance and non-compliance?

While these questions and ideas were helpful in organizing my thoughts in advance of the para-site, as I will elaborate further in the next section, the actual event both frustrated and went beyond these initial formulations. As a “non anthropologist” (that is, someone trained in a different discipline), the assumptions that I see under-girding the para-site have been highly important to my thinking about fieldwork and my dissertation research. In particular, Dr. Marcus’ recognition/provocation that research ‘informants’ are always already reflexive actors in the world who are embedded in multiple fields has been influential for me. The idea - the provocation – to conceive of individuals who we engage with in fieldwork as ‘epistemic partners’ has also proved stimulating. While this para-site occurred solely with parole agents, and not parolees, this line of thinking seems important to consider not just in conjunction with ‘experts’, bureaucrats or professionals, but also with ‘everyday’ collaborators, in my case,

parolees (who often are socially marginalized in a variety of ways). Individuals on parole, as well as parole agents, are reflexive actors who are mutually situated in the world. As Dr. Marcus once noted, individuals on parole have to ‘walk a tight-rope’ while on parole, and during the course of my fieldwork it has become clear that they need to be (and are) acutely aware and thoughtful about the social situations in which they find themselves. In a way, parole can be seen as a balancing act, between the exigencies of parole (including the formal rules of parole and the demands that parole agents place on individuals) and the demands emanating from ‘other’ realms (for example, work and family situations).

What happened? Reflections on the para-site

At the risk of being redundant, the function of the para-site was not (fully) self-evident to me. Undoubtedly a para-site will vary widely from project to project.

During the actual event, I was less concerned about what was ‘para-ethnographic’ or not, and more with engaging with what occurred and the ways in which it stimulated my thinking. Further, some of the moments in the para-site which I initially felt had ‘failed’ are turning out to be interesting strands for me to stick with. For instance, I was somewhat disappointed with what appeared as the inability to delve deeper into conversations about the topics of “discretion”, “instinct”, and “gut feeling” brought up by the agents. Agents repeatedly acknowledged the place and importance of gut feeling in their everyday practices, but seemed to avoid discussing how this gut feeling is informed or given content. And in retrospect, this elision on their part is actually quite interesting. While I was hoping to plunge further into this topic in the para-site,

and hence engage in collaborative conceptualization about it, the limits to and apparent evasions of this conversation themselves important (and illuminating) data.

Discussion that centered on discretion was similarly interesting. Agents would acknowledge it plays a central role, but repeatedly minimized or played down the ways in which they exercise discretion. They were very willing to highlight various institutional and social constraints on their discretion. And, during several of the conversations centered on discretion, conversation would turn to the conduct (of course evaluated by the parole agent in subjective and discretionary ways) of the parolee, and how this shaped the boundaries of how they exercised discretion. Hence, from the perspective of the agents, the agents’ actions (which evince and involve their ability to exercise discretion) seem to become in large part something that is produced, formed or limited by the parolee. That is, although the agents acknowledge that they have discretion, it appears that they are suggesting that this discretion only exists to the extent that parolees allow them to have it. The ‘bad’, ‘uncooperative’ or ‘non-compliant’ parolee (those who do not display respect to the agents, those who do not comply with all of the rules, etc.) forces them to act in certain ways, hence removing or at least limiting their discretion. Comments such as: ‘if the parolee treats me with respect, I treat him with respect’, seem to highlight that agents place discretion – consciously or intentionally – into a kind of rational actor model, and that any evaluations or perspectives that de-value or de-humanize the parolee are seen to be the product of the parolee’s inappropriate actions or attitudes.

Another useful thing that emerged from this para-site was the collaborative conversations that this event spurred among the organizers and academics in attendance. A series of collective e-mails followed the event in which people shared various impressions and thoughts with one

another, which served to considerably stimulate my thought. In retrospect, I would have liked to have possibly included the parole agents and supervisors as participants in this e-mail exchange. For any future para-sites, I think it would be helpful to gather all of the participants’ thoughts and reflections on the event, continuing the process of shared conceptual work.

I want to share, and perhaps work with, some of the strands of thought that came up within the e-mail chain. Here is an excerpt from Dr. Justin Richland’s email:

“There was a sense in the room, it seemed to me, that their job was to "inform" us about being parole agents. As such, I found -- and I believe Rob, you found this too -- that this really wasn't a moment for reflexive considerations of the tools and techniques of parole. Now that I think about it, the need they felt to explain acronyms, processes and procedures, and then, interestingly, to dispel what they anticipated were our misconceptions about parole (John saying "we don't just throw them back in prison for nothing" or something like that) suggested that they were seeing themselves as informants rather than collaborators.”

Justin continues on to note that there were interesting (para-ethnographic) moments, but I also sensed that agents felt the need to disabuse us of some of our ‘misconceptions’. And related to this, not unexpectedly there appeared to be a considerable amount of ‘canned’ statements and stories, as well as a certain amount of what Dr. George Marcus termed “self-justificatory” statements. Yet, there were many moments that went beyond canned or standard stories (or performance designed for the academic audience or for the other parole agents), and the para-site did seem to elicit different types of conversations. For example, following some questions or provocations (such as Jesse’s insightful comments that began the 2nd half, Justin’s question about whether or not they like some of the parolees, and George’s interjection of my previous research into the discussion), the conversation morphed into more of a collaborative effort to explore certain topics. Further, the para-site was able to elicit certain fault lines among the parole agents

that might not be able to occur in other settings. In particular, I am thinking of the time when Thomas² (and several other agents) challenged Richard’s statement that he had “never” witnessed a parole agent act unprofessionally or discourteously towards a parolee. These moments of disagreement were quite productive.

My fieldnotes and reflections about the para-site are filled with ideas, questions and problems that are ripe for further inquiry. For instance, Scott, in a very pointed tone, stated that parole has changed radically - “100 percent” –in the last several years, yet did not elaborate very much on this point, although several individuals seemed to agree with his diagnosis. Additionally, a number of the agents talked repeatedly about “the case”, which appeared to be a proxy for the individual parolee. This seems a rich area to further interrogate. And, the hesitancy, resistance or inability to further discuss or elaborate upon ‘gut feeling’ and the ways in which they evaluate and make decisions about parolees seems quite important to what agents do and how they conceive of their practices. It appears that there is a taken-for-granted quality to evaluating parolees (and deciding whether they should remain in the community or be returned to prison); a certain ‘invisible obviousness’ to this process. And this seeming blank spot or limit to these conversations is, in my view, important to follow up.

I am also interested in following up with the importance that the parole participants placed on different ‘types’ of parolees. As George noted (in one of this emails): “[a]lso fascinating how certain 'types' of parolee de jour so dominates standard views of practice---from the second-striker to the sex offender to the coming gang-banger. There is a deep cynicism here, but also a fascinating ethno or para sociology / ethnographic complicity of what these

² Names have been changed to protect anonymity.

civilian corrections officers are involved with.” I think this is a rich area to continue to think and inquire about.

I will close with what has been absent from this discussion so far (and unfortunately, what was absent at the actual para-site due to the death of one of my collaborators): the individuals on parole. I had originally planned to have a two-part parasite, where the first half would take place with individuals on parole, and the second half would take place with DAPO personnel.) In the end, individuals on parole were of course an absent presence, or, inverting Kaushik’s phrase, perhaps they were the protagonists in absentia. I think that the event might have had a different shape if we had been able to have the two sessions that day, or if we could stage a para-site that included both parolees and agents in one session. As George stated, “the parallel between the anthropologist who works with parolees and the parole officers still needed explicit provocation”, and I think a future para-site would provide a good venue for such a provocation.