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***Features of the methodology of observant participation in ethnography  
of work and the workplace***

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## **Problem Statement**

Ethnographic research is one of the key approaches in social sciences, offering researchers a methodology and techniques which enable them to delve deeply into the world of informants: to get as close as possible to their lived experiences, and the meanings they ascribe to different phenomena; to meticulously describe and comprehend social norms, situations, and processes; to trace causal relationships from within [Hammersley, 2018, p. 2]. Today, both the notion and research practice of 'ethnographic research' have become relatively broad and vague in terms of its methodological framework and underlying principles [Ingold, 2014]. This is evidenced by a substantial number of publications aiming to clarify the methodology of the ethnographic approach [Atkinson, Hammersley, 1998], discussions on the scientific status and cognitive capability of ethnographic research [Becker, 1958; Deener, 2018], on the semantics and genesis of concepts [Gold, 1957; Seim, 2021], on the peculiarities of ethnographic description and text [Clifford, 1983; Rabinow, 1985; Gullion, 2021]. On the one hand, ethnographic research has become a popular approach [Ingold, 2014, p. 384]; on the other hand, its methodology and practical application vary depending on the subject area, theoretical preferences, goals and objectives of the researcher.

In sociology, ethnographic research is often defined as one of the approaches within the scope of qualitative methodology [Atkinson, Hammersley, 2007; Campbell, Lassiter, 2014]. The consensus among the scholars is that this approach is primarily concerned with in situ observation [Chapoulie, 1987], also referred to as 'participant observation,' which involves the researcher engaging in fieldwork in 'natural settings' and documenting the unfolding events. The key difference between in situ observation and other qualitative and quantitative methods is in the extent to which the researcher immerses and participates in the subjects' world [Smith, 2019]. However, in practice, the extent of both immersion and participation is challenging to define. As a result, many various research practices are grouped together under the umbrella term of 'participant observation.'

The ethnographic approach is widely employed in organisational, labour and workplace studies. However, a recurrent problem in these contexts is lack of clarity in researchers' academic texts regarding their observational methodologies: whether there was access to the workplace; if so, what kind of access; the circumstances under which observations were conducted; their frequency and duration; the opportunities available to the researcher during the observation process, etc. While other various practices of in situ observation are also applicable in this field of study, full immersion and participation are only possible when the researcher becomes an active participant in the organisational context or workplace under study—that is, when they begin to work there.

In recent years, the research literature has increasingly referred to this method of data collection as 'observant participation' instead of 'participant observation' [Seim, 2021; Tedlock, 1991; Moeran, 2009]. This places greater emphasis on the position of the researcher in the field rather than on the methodological basis of that position. This dissertation research is predicated on the assumption that observant participation is a distinct type of methodology and research practice that allows for the analysis of not only the observed social reality, but also the researcher's experience as a participant in that social reality.

In domestic sociology, ethnographic research on labour and/or workplace is understood and defined in a variety of ways. With regard to methods, the interview method is predominant, while short-term participant observation is utilised less frequently (see, e.g., [Abramov, 2012]). The aforementioned general problems associated with the use of the ethnographic approach are, to a large extent, inherent to the works of domestic researchers. In addition, there is lack of a systemic nature in the utilisation of the ethnographic approach in labour and workplace research, which hinders the development of the methodology and techniques for such kind of studies. A thorough analysis of existing principles, procedures and practices of ethnographic research on labour and the workplace, including those in domestic sociology, has revealed the theoretical and methodological potential of ethnography. This contributes to the

enhancement of methodological tools for a comprehensive description and analysis of relations and processes in the workplace.

### **Problem development**

The works of P. Atkinson and M. Hammersley [Atkinson, Hammersley, 2007; Hammersley, 2013; Atkinson, 2007], N.K. Denzin [Denzin, 1997], E. Campbell and L. Lassiter [Campbell, Lassiter, 2014], D.M. Fetterman [Fetterman, 2019], G. Gobo [Gobo, 2008] and others have made a substantial contribution to the systematization of research experience as well as to defining concepts and practices related to the ethnographic approach. In sociology, ethnography is often defined as one of the approaches in qualitative methodology [Atkinson, Hammersley, 2019; Campbell, Lassiter, 2014]. There is research consensus that this approach is primarily concerned with observing informants ‘in their natural habitat’ and diligently taking field notes.

C. Geertz elaborated on textualization of ethnography [Geertz, 2004], emphasizing that when the ethnographer records social discourse, “it is transformed from an event that only exists at the moment of its occurrence into an account that exists in written form and can be returned to time and again” [Rubel, Chegrinets, 1998, p. 89]. In the late 1970s, discussions on the rhetoric and politics of ethnographic research emerged among anthropologists. In 1986, James Clifford and George Marcus published *Writing Culture*, a landmark work [Clifford, Marcus, 1986]. Researchers began to reflect upon their relations with informants as well as the ways of writing an ethnographic text: previously familiar forms of writing are challenged, and their claim to objective description is called into question. Consequently, research process became more transparent, and in later monographs, we can see anthropologists openly reflect on what their fieldwork looked like and how subsequent text were produced [Atkinson, 1992; Atkinson and Coffey, 1995]. In anthropology, ‘reflexivity’ indeed can take various forms, its main objects being methods, writing, the nature of fieldwork, and the position and role of the researcher.

In sociology, it was Pierre Bourdieu who elaborated on the reflexive position of the researcher and proposed a project of reflexive sociology based on ‘participant objectivation’ [Bourdieu, 2002]. According to it, “the subject of objectivation and even, to be more precise, the effects of knowledge of the objectivating posture, that is, the transformation undergone by the experience of the social world” [Bourdieu, 2011, p.32] becomes the object of study. The researcher can, and should, appeal to their own comprehension of the social world, but essentially subjecting it to rigorous critical scrutiny. In his writings on reflexive sociology, S. Venkatesh posits the critical importance of first-person narrative: “scholars are turning to the self in order to discover not only truths about their own experience but about the world out there” [Venkatesh, 2013]. In practice, the first-person narrative can take different forms; the key feature is reflexivity as “a tool for sociologists <...> [which] can serve as a means of understanding limitations in the data <...> [or] assist in the process of refining instruments of data collection.” [Ibid., p.5]

At the same time, social scientists have a long history of interest in using a variety of methods — including ethnographic ones, e.g. description and analysis of everyday labor practices, workplaces, relations and processes — to research different aspects of labor. Ethnography of work and the workplace was developed<sup>1</sup> in the writings of D. Roy [Roy, 1959], H. Beynon [Beynon, 1973], J. Ditton [Ditton, 1977], G. Applebaum [Applebaum, 1981], A. Pollert [Pollert, 1981], M. Burawoy [Burawoy, 1982], M. Glucksmann [Cavendish<sup>2</sup>, 1982], D. Collinson [Collinson, 1992] and others. Most of these works contain separate sections dedicated to the fieldwork process: matters such as access to the field, relations with informants, difficulties posed by this kind of

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<sup>1</sup> In some recent works, this approach is referred to as ‘workplace and organizational ethnography’ (WOE) [Sebastian, 2022]. However, for such a general term, it is difficult to find a Russian equivalent that is as smooth and concise.

<sup>2</sup> Mariam Glucksmann's first monograph was published under a pseudonym.

research, ethical dilemmas and consequences of publishing the study results<sup>3</sup> are brought in question.

Some researchers believe that the ethnography of work and the workplace (EWW) was at the height of its popularity in the 1970s and 1980s, but has since become a marginalized research approach [Frege, 2005; Whitfield, Strauss, 2000]. However, this line of research has a long history [Zickar, Carter, 2010]: there are numerous publications in English that substantiate the EWW methodology and describe its practices.

EWW is generally regarded as a set of research practices and/or texts which fulfil at least two characteristics: firstly, the research builds on long-term immersion in fieldwork (in situ observation [Chapoulie, 1987]) lasting 6 to 12 months on average; secondly, fieldwork involves assuming a role similar to that of informants (e.g., factory worker [Halle, 1984; Burawoy, Lukás, 1992], strawberry picker [Wells, 1996], emergency medical technician [Seim, 2021], etc.). ‘Assuming a role’ is increasingly being defined by scholars as ‘observant participation’ or ‘observation of participation’ [Seim, 2021]. In this case, the researcher does not simply observe what is going on around them and spends time with informants (‘hanging around’), but becomes an active participant themselves.

Josh Seim shows that most of the research we consider ethnographic can retrospectively be seen as done with the method of ‘observant participation’, as researchers immerse themselves in fieldwork environment and acted in accordance with a role similar to that of informants. Seim suggests that “observant participation leads the ethnographer into social settings that are presumably more difficult to access as a participant observer” [Seim, 2021, p.5]. Using his own ethnography of work in emergency medical services, Seim demonstrates the advantages of ‘hybrid ethnography’, i.e. consistent use of both methods, participant observation (encounters with informants, going on ambulance calls, attending meetings) and observant

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, M. Glucksmann published her first monograph under a pseudonym because, had she used her real name, it could have led to repercussions for her colleagues at the factory. However, as she explains in the preface to the second edition, she was eventually exposed [Cavendish, 1982].

participation (“short-term employment as a novice emergency medical technician at the same company” [Ibid., p.1]).

Michael Burawoy is probably the most well-known ethnographer of the workplace in Russian social sciences. He developed the Extended Case Method<sup>4</sup>, which allowed him to go beyond a single research case [Burawoy, 1997]. Also, he published several works on the ethnographic approach; in one of them he states that the method of participant observation raises the issue of the dialogue between the observer and the observed. Therefore, participant observation “is paradigmatic of all social science and not merely a quaint technique at the margins” [Burawoy, 1991, p. x].

Apart from the obvious epistemic value EWW has [Down, 2012], EWW research papers are usually written in a particular way that allows us to move up to the level of theoretical generalization in their analysis (“meta-analysis of ethnographic texts,” see e.g. [Hodson, 2004; Edwards, Bélanger, 2008]).

In Russian sociology, the method of participant observation became known largely thanks to the methodological manuals by V.A. Yadov and A.G. Zdravomyslov (e.g. [Yadov, 1968, Zdravomyslov, 1969]). Based on the texts of American researchers, Soviet sociologists defined it as “direct recording of events by an eyewitness,” stating its secondary role in relation to survey methods [Yadov, 1972, p. 112, 120]. Despite the fact that the method of participant observation was actually used by Soviet sociologists (one of the first cases is that of V. Olshansky in the early 1960s), there are almost no accounts of it in sociological publications of that period. The research project carried out by A. N. Alekseev is the only exception [A.N. Alekseev, 1997, 2003, 2005], and I analyze it in my dissertation.

In connection with the study of the case of A. N. Alekseev, research on the phenomenon of Soviet sociology is essential; in particular, the works of A. Filippov [Filippov, 2014], A. Bikbov and S. Gavrilenko [Bikbov, Gavrilenko, 2002], M.

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<sup>4</sup> Burawoy delineates four principles of comprehensive monographic research, “immersion into the informant's world; observation extended over time and space; expansion from micro to macro; and the deepening of theory.” [Burawoy, 1997, p. 162].

Sokolov [Sokolov, 2011; Sokolov, 2017], D. Kurakin [Kurakin, 2017], L. Titarenko and E. Zdravomyslova [Titarenko, Zdravomyslova, 2017], D. Dimke [Dimke, 2012]. To date, there are only a few works specifically addressing the history of Soviet sociology of work (e.g. [Pattle, 2022]), which tends to be treated in the context of broader issues.

In the 1990s, thanks to the work of foreign researchers in Russia, notably S. Clarke [Ashwin, Clarke, 2002], M. Burawoy [Burawoy, Krotov, 1992], C. Clément [Clément, 2003; Clément, 1999] and S. Ashwin [Ashwin, 1999], labor and workplace research continued. In some of them, the method of participant observation was used: for example, M. Burawoy and C. Clément worked at Russian industrial enterprises. Led by S. Clark, the researchers developed the methodology of case study in industrial relations [Kozina, Serezhkina, 2015; Kozina, 1997]: it involved participant observation alongside with other methods. Many well-known Russian sociologists participated in those projects (to name a few, V. Ilyin, I. Kozina, P. Bizyukov, V. Kabalina, I. Tartakovskaya, E. Iarskaia-Smirnova, P. Romanov, S. Yaroshenko, etc.). At that time, the idea of ‘hard’ quantitative methods and ‘soft’ qualitative ones was dominant in Russian sociology [Ashwin, Yakubovich, 2023]. However, those projects suggested that qualitative methods were rigorous and systematic.

It was in the 1990s when proper reflexion on the nature of qualitative methodology in Russian social sciences began. For example, I. Deviatko covered a whole range of qualitative methods, explicitly stating both advantages and disadvantages of participant observation [Deviatko, 1998]. A. Gotlib wrote on methodology and research practices, aiming to achieve the balance between quantitative and qualitative approaches [Gotlib, 2004]. V. Ilyin proposed to consider qualitative research as a performance where informants are preoccupied with the issue of self-presentation during interviews since “[they] are here to be studied” [Ilyin, 2006]. E. Rozhdestvenskaya thoroughly examines the issue of the quality and reliability of data collection processes within the framework of qualitative methodology, using the example of interviews [Rozhdestvenskaya, 2014].



The works of V. Voronkov, O. Brednikova, E. Chikadze [Voronkov, Chikadze, 2009], T. Shanin [Shanin, 1998], I. Steinberg [Steinberg, 2021], S. Belanovsky [Belanovsky, 1993], etc. made a significant contribution to the development of qualitative methodology in general and the ethnographic approach in particular within the framework of Russian sociology.

P. Romanov and E. Iarskaia-Smirnova wrote several papers on ethnography as a research approach [Iarskaia-Smirnova, Romanov, 1998, 2000, 2007]. For my dissertation, P. Romanov's work on 'social ethnography' in organizational research is of particular value [Romanov, 1997].

The works of I. Kozina [Kozina, 1997] and E. Polukhina [Polukhina, 2013] contributed to the development of the case study research strategy, including industrial relations research [Kozina, 1995; Kozina, Serezhkina, 2015].

In particular, E. Polukhina's works added to the systematization of knowledge and practices in the context of ethnographic research in Russian sociology [Polukhina, 2010], as well as to the development of the ethnographic focus group toolkit [Polukhina, 2012].

A. Filkina problematized interactions between the researcher and informants in sociological research where the ethnographic method was used [Filkina, 2009]. A. Strelnikova, A. Vanke, and E. Polukhina wrote on how to apply qualitative methodology [Vanke, Polukhina, Strelnikova, 2020] when studying industrial areas [Polukhina, Vanke, 2017, 2019].

In this paper, I adopt the understanding of methodology proposed by V. A. Yadov, who defined it as "a set of research procedures, techniques and methods, including methods of data collection and processing"<sup>5</sup> [Yadov, 2000, p. 63].

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<sup>5</sup> According to Yadov, "'method' is the primary means of collecting, processing and analysing data; 'technique' is a set of special practices for the effective use of a particular method; 'methodology' is a set of technical practices related to a given method, including particular operations, their sequence and interrelation; 'procedure' is usually understood as a sequence of all operations, a general system of actions and modes of research design." [Yadov, 2000, p. 63].

My study attempts to conceptualize ‘observant participation’ as an indicator of the researcher’s reflexive position: a position which requires not only active participation but the ability to objectify one’s own experience.

**The object of the dissertation:**

Methodology of ethnographic workplace research.

**The subject of the dissertation:**

The application of observant participation methodology within the ethnography of work and the workplace (EWW).

**The aim of the dissertation research:**

To develop and justify methodological features of observant participation within the EWW framework.

**Achieving this aim involves solving the following objectives:**

1. To systematize the existing principles, procedures and practices of the ethnography of work and the workplace in foreign and Russian sociology.
2. To propose a conceptual justification of the methodology of ‘observant participation.’
3. To develop a methodological toolkit for ethnography of work and the workplace (EWW).
4. To pilot test the toolkit by conducting empirical research of the workplace of several workplaces.

**Theoretical foundations of the research**

This dissertation’s theoretical foundations lie in the approaches to ethnographic research in general and workplace ethnography in particular, which postulate a transition towards ‘observant participation.’

As a starting point, I take the approach outlined by C. Geertz, who suggested focusing on interpretation and meaning as opposed to positivism and deduction. [Geertz, 2004]. Instead of providing us with universalizing models, ethnographic research should rather lead us to ‘thick description.’ In this sense, we speak of ‘observant participation’ not only as a shift in the researcher’s fieldwork role (from observation to participation), but also as a reflexive approach to studying social reality. Here I draw on the works of B. Tedlock, J. Clifford and G. Marcus, and M. Fischer.

In addition, I rely on the epistemological development of ‘reflexive sociology’ coined by P. Bourdieu and elaborated by L. Wacquant, where ‘objectification of the objectifying subject’ serves as key basis [Wacquant, 1989; Wacquant, 2014]. This approach argues that the researcher’s own experience is one more ‘tool of investigation’ [Wacquant, 2014, p. 82]. Found in various ethnographic writings, this idea is equally applicable to workplace studies: when the researcher assumes the role of a worker, they inevitably experience the effect of social environment, including on the corporeal level, especially if they do manual labor.

### **Description of the methodological approach**

The dissertation research is based on the following data and materials (‘sources’):

1. The data I collected during my own workplace ethnography research: field diaries, notes, documents. I worked as a packer and packaging operator at a candy factory in the Moscow region for a year (August 2016–August 2017) on standard terms. What began as ‘covert’ participant observation, later evolved in relatively overt ‘observant participation’<sup>6</sup>. It is important to note that originally, the practice of writing ethnographic diaries was mandatory, as it was a pivotal component of fieldwork. The

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<sup>6</sup> Previously, I did not define my approach as ‘participant observation’ because its conceptualization occurs only in the context of dissertation research. Furthermore, I refer to it as ‘relatively overt’ observation because, in extended ethnographic fieldwork, it is challenging to establish clear boundaries between the ‘covert’ and ‘overt’ positions of the researcher.

essential principle was to write down everything that happened around me and with me after each work shift.

2. The published texts by A.N. Alekseev, where he documented his experience of prolonged ‘observant participation’ in the role of an industrial worker. For my research, the value of his texts lies in that they provide a detailed account of, firstly, his research process, and secondly, his observations presented as an objectified narrative of his experience in the role of an industrial worker. In this regard, A.N. Alekseev’s texts are a ‘source’, which I subject to critical analysis in my dissertation. A.N. Alekseev extensively uses field notes in his monographs, noting in the introduction that he did not rewrite and hardly edited those notes, only excluding some sensitive information. The excerpts from A.N. Alekseev’s field notes included in the book are always dated. Additionally, this dataset includes published interviews with A.N. Alekseev conducted by B.Z. Doktorov over the years [Alekseev, Doktorov, 2012].

3. Expert interviews conducted by me from 2020 to 2023. Basically, my informants can be divided into four groups:

- 1) former colleagues of A.N. Alekseev;
- 2) sociologists who were acquainted with his work;
- 3) sociologists who were engaged in labor research in Russia during the 1980s–1990s but may not have known A.N. Alekseev;
- 4) foreign researchers who were engaged in EWW in Russia in the 1990s.

A total of 13 interviews were conducted. Those interviews aimed to clarify the context in which A.N. Alekseev conducted his research (in the 1980s) and later wrote his first monograph (in the 1990s). The interviews were unstructured discussions on a particular set of topics, such as: the interviewee’s experience in labor research in the 1980s and/or 1990s; if they are acquainted with A.N. Alekseev and/or his works; their experience in applying the method of participant observation, etc. When I interviewed foreign sociologists, I also asked them about their impressions of working and interacting with Soviet and Russia social researchers.

In my dissertation research, I subject both my case and that of A.N. Alekseev to critical analysis with the aim of conceptualizing and justifying the use of the ‘participant observation’ method in EWW.

## **Justification of the methods and empirical data selection**

### **1. Case selection**

The case of A. N. Alekseev:

1) provides a concise and detailed description of fieldwork and the contexts in which it occurred;

2) contains attempts to specifically conceptualize ‘observant participation.’ This is the sole example which can serve as a source for the analysis of EWW in Soviet and Russian sociology.

My case—the ‘Workplace Ethnography’ project served as a starting point for the EWW the methodology analysis.

### **2. Selection of interviewees**

In terms of significance for the research outcomes, the data collected by the interviews was of secondary importance. For that reason, I selected interviewees based on my own understanding of what kind of knowledge I needed to acquire at a particular stage of the work. The list of interviewees is not exhaustive. In the event of further development of my academic work towards the history of the formation and development of qualitative methodology in EWW in Russian sociology, there remains a vast research field.

### **Study limitations**

An evident limitation of the dissertation research is that few practices of employing an ethnographic approach in workplace research have been documented in studies published by Russian scholars. The existing literature scarcely reflects the extent of the experience accumulated by Russian researchers in this domain. This suggests two

possible interpretations. On the one hand, it may be indicative of a decision to not make the researcher's experience a unit of analysis in the text. On the other hand, it may be indicative of a tendency for such experiences to be reflected verbally or to remain in the researcher's personal writings.

### **Approbation: empirical testing of the approach**

The analyses and justification for the methodology of observant participation are initially based on solo ethnographic cases of long-term workplace research. The proposed method was tested from 2020 to 2023 within the scope of my involvement in a series of applied business projects in collaboration with several research agencies. I participated in a total of six projects, which, in the parlance of business research, involved studying the 'employee experience' at several different organizations: (1) grocery stores (cashiers, sales clerks), (2) marketplace and food retail distribution centers (workpeople), (3) an industrial enterprise (workpeople), (5) car dealerships (sales managers), (6) construction companies (sales managers).

My responsibility was to organize and execute the ethnographic research process; this included training and preparing researchers for the work and co-producing field descriptions with them. The primary method employed was 'observant participation,' which entailed the employment of researchers in the positions requiring no (or minimal) professional qualifications and work in the role for several working shifts to one and a half months.

At various times, about 40 researchers worked with me on such projects, with three to ten people in the field at a time. The majority of the ethnographers already had research and/or academic background, but many lacked experience in ethnographic work.

All the observations were 'covert,' meaning that neither the client nor other staff<sup>7</sup> knew who was working where (if there were multiple sites).

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<sup>7</sup> In this dissertation, questions of research ethics are discussed separately.

The main elements of the tested research approach were as follows:

- (a) 'observant participation' (ethnographic research conducted in the role of a worker);
- (b) collectivity (active ('involved') participation of more than one individual in the research);
- (c) task division (implied asymmetry regarding data collection and analysis process [Clerke, Hopwood, 2014, p.10 -14], i.e. not all the participants work in the field);
- (d) diaries 'for others' (the field researcher(s) write their notes in a manner that renders them comprehensible to those team members who do not participate in fieldwork. This ensures that the notes are conducive to systematic data analysis by a researcher other than the (only) one who authored the diaries);
- (e) co-production of field ethnographic diaries (if one field researcher was responsible for writing the diaries, at least one colleague of theirs, not engaged in fieldwork, read them on a regular basis, posing clarifying questions, providing comments, etc.);
- (g) a shorter period of fieldwork (instead of several months or a year, the study was designed to be completed within a shorter period of time, ranging from one week to one and a half months).

The collective nature ('collectivity') of the work was associated with the need for 'accelerated' project implementation, the researchers' limited qualifications, and the necessity to assess the viability of the proposed methodology of observant participation in ethnography of labor and workplace in terms of transmitting its principles and practices.

## **Main results of the study**

### ***The concepts of 'ethnography of work and the workplace' and 'observant participation': definition***

The research area of EWW revolves around the concepts of 'workplace ethnography,' 'ethnography of work,' 'organizational ethnography,' and 'observant participation.' To assess its current state, I analyzed publications available through Google Scholar's

scientific citation database over an unlimited period of time using ‘workplace ethnography,’ ‘ethnography of work,’ ‘organizational ethnography,’ and ‘observant participation’ search queries (in English).

It was noted that many of the works pertinent to this field of study do not contain such word combinations in their titles. Therefore, I examined the reference lists in the papers I had discovered to conduct a more thorough search for relevant review and historiographic works.

The term ‘workplace ethnography’ appears most frequently in EWW writings; however, it does not always refer to the same set of research methods. It has been associated with practices such as non-participant observation and interviews [Carmel, 2011], various interpretations of participant observation [De Vaujany, Aroles, 2019; Billett, 2008], semi-structured and unstructured interviews [Martin, Scribner, 1991; Billett, 2008], etc.

The literature analysis indicates that EWW, in its broadest sense, encompasses various works and research practices, depending on the author’s disciplinary affiliations and research objectives. A study can be designated as EWW if it a) implements the ‘ethnographic approach’ and b) focuses on ‘the workplace’, although these concepts are rarely defined clearly.

Publications from different years define the approach of ‘observant participation’ or ‘observation of participation’ as direct involvement in the life of the community under study [Tedlock, 1991; Seim, 2021]. In other words, the researcher adopts a more active stance in the field compared to participant observation [Moeran, 2009]. Within the context of EWW, ‘participation’ means collaborative work that requires the researcher to assume a specific role, that of a colleague to their informants. Greater activity in the field [Moeran, 2009] suggests that researchers should not hesitate to take action for fear that it might somehow compromise the ‘naturalness’ of the field [Tedlock, 1991]. Thus, within the scope of EWW, there has not been sufficient reflection on what constitutes the ‘ethnographic approach’, and the participation of researchers has barely been problematized.



### ***The transition from ‘participant observation’ to ‘observant participation’***

If we go beyond the EWW research area, L. Wacquant’s interpretation of the ‘transition’ from participant observation to observant participation [Wacquant, 2014, p. 116] is the most valuable for my dissertation research. In his study of professional boxers in the ‘black’ ghetto of Chicago [Wacquant, 2004], he demonstrates 1) how active participation allows the researcher to explore how the community works, and 2) following in P. Bourdieu’s footsteps — how objectification of your own experience (including its corporeal level) can provide insight into the effect of the social environment on ‘body and soul’ [Wacquant, 2014].

In this dissertation, I define ‘observant participation’ as a research method, or approach, in which the researcher assumes a role similar to that of their informants, actively participates in community life, and objectifies their own experience in this role through reflexive analysis of their participation.

### ***The use of the ethnographic approach in Russian sociology of work and the workplace: practices and contexts***

To identify practices and contexts associated with the ethnographic approach in labor and workplace research in Russian sociology, I analyzed publications available through Google Scholar's and eLibrary’s scientific citation databases

At the first stage, I used keywords to select publications that essentially define and conceptualize ‘ethnography’ and ‘participant observation’ in sociology; at the second stage, I used the reference lists to select those potentially related to EWW.

Additionally, to clarify the context within which A.N. Alekseev undertook his research project, I turned to methodological texts written during the Soviet period (1950s–1980s) and the 1990s (since A.N. Alekseev published his first monograph in 1997).

On the one hand, sociological publications aimed at defining participant observation or describing practices associated with it typically focus on observing and recording

what happens around the researcher. Guides and recommendations suggest describing the behavior and attitudes of informants, and conversations researchers have with them. The term ‘observant participation’, or ‘observing participation’, is rarely used. On the other hand, it can be noted that there are virtually no texts in Russian that employ the concepts of ‘ethnography of work’ or ‘the workplace.’<sup>8</sup>

For this reason, A.N. Alekseev's research stands out. When he defined his method as ‘observant participation’, he did not solely based it on the idea that the researcher must actively engage with the field when assuming the role of an industrial worker.

The analysis of A.N. Alekseev's works revealed that in his research project, the focus shifts from observing workers to observing one's own experience in the role of a worker through the objectification of this experience. Here, ‘observant participation’ as used by A.N. Alekseev is methodologically close to the way this method is conceptualized by L. Wacquant.

### ***‘Observant participation’ in ethnographic research of the workplace in Russian sociology***

L. Wacquant wrote a paper on professional boxing. Setting aside the peculiarities of the boundaries between professional and amateur boxing, it seems fair to say that Wacquant's work adds to the EWW research area. He presents an ethnographic narrative with himself and his experience of practicing professional boxing as a sport and as a profession at the core. His daily practices described in the paper take place in a gym, which, in a broad sense, can be considered as ‘the workplace’ of professional athletes. This approach to building up analysis of workplace relationships as well as the ethnographic narrative on ‘workplaces’ can be found in many EWW studies,

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<sup>8</sup> By emphasizing the ‘Russian language’, I am implying the papers written by Russian sociologists, as this is about a local EWW ‘tradition’. However, it is research conducted by foreign sociologists which holds significant importance for the theoretical domain of knowledge on labor and industrial relations research where the ethnographic approach is used. Besides the already mentioned research on workers at industrial enterprises, in post-Soviet Russia, there is also an example of EWW at a university where a foreign researcher taught for several consecutive years [Spencer, 2009]

making it possible to consider such research as conducted with the method of ‘observant participation.’ A.N. Alekseev builds up his narrative in the same fashion, placing himself as a worker and researcher at its core. The same is true with respect to my own work [Pinchuk, 2021a].

A distinctive feature of A.N. Alekseev's approach is the idea that the researcher must actively engage with the field when assuming the role of an industrial worker. He indeed actively participated in the life of the workshop. An illustrative example of this is the ‘partisanship’, which in the USSR referred to various ways of taking action at the enterprise, including those motivated by self-interest [Pinchuk, 2022c, p. 80]. A.N. Alekseev describes a different kind of ‘partisanship’, where workers unofficially manufactured industrial details not for sale or personal use, but to fulfill the plan. It was, in fact, A.N. Alekseev himself who initiated such ‘partisanship’ by proposing to stamp the details on his pressing machine. [Pinchuk, 2022c].

As part of my ethnographic research using ‘observant participation’, I examined a set of narratives that I was able to describe and analyze thanks to my own experience as a factory worker. Having received training as a packaging operator, I managed to describe the labor practices and workplace relationships of factory workers. Additionally, I have explored the impact that pace and modes of labor management have on the workers (burns on the hands caused by clumsy and unskilled handling of equipment due to constant rushing, sleep problems resulting from shift work, etc.). Working as an operator subsequently led me to the conclusion that the labor of the candy factory operators requires greater involvement and the use of creative skills (‘living knowledge’, [Gorz, 2007]) due to equipment wear and tear [Pinchuk, 2022d]. Although this conclusion is rooted in an ethnographic description of the factory workplace, it was also later confirmed by other workplace research where I participated in the co-production of field ethnographic descriptions based on the observations of field researchers in the role of workers.

The use of the ‘observant participation’ method in EWW implies research reflexivity [Bourdieu, 2002], i.e. the researcher is required to describe and analyze not only the

informative part of observations but also the research process itself. As a result of my work at the factory, I reflect on the research labor in ethnographic study and thoroughly describe and analyze the course of fieldwork, my preconceptions and stereotypes, and my own experience of participation. [Pinchuk, 2021a, p. 132–193].

### ***Ethnographic research of work and the workplace (EWW): specifics and limitations***

The analysis of my own experience in implementing EWW revealed a number of specific features and problem areas.

1. Objectification of one's own academic and non-professional socialization becomes key. It is stated that EWW ‘begins with the researcher’, as it is critically important what attitudes, skills, and theoretical foundations the ethnographer has at the start of their research.

2. The researcher is essentially working two ‘jobs’, as a worker and as an ethnographer. However, one’s ability to perform research tasks, such as recording observations undoubtedly depends on the pace and modes of labor management at the enterprise.

3. Despite the aforementioned difficulties, maintaining daily field notes is considered mandatory, as it is ethnographer’s key task.

4. Regardless of whether observant participation is ‘overt’ or ‘covert’, ethical complexities arise at different stages of fieldwork, and they must be addressed. On the one hand, anonymization of both observation subjects and informants should be considered mandatory. On the other hand, observant participation must imply following basic ethical principles, such as respecting informants and their privacy.

5. It becomes challenging to maintain collective work over a long period. If the fieldwork lasts for a year and there is only one field researcher while the rest of the team are not fully immersed in the project, it may lead to asymmetry of engagement and imbalanced distribution of the workload among team members.

6. Regardless of how research work is organized, the field ethnographer must always have the autonomy to manage their observations (in adherence with ethical principles). Other team members should discuss the use of field notes with them.

### ***Collective and rapid ethnography of work and the workplace (EWW)***

In my dissertation work, I subjected two research projects, A.N. Alekseev's and mine, to systematic analysis. After considering their specifics and limitations, I developed a strategy of 'collective EWW,' which was tested between 2020 and 2023 in several projects by different organizations.

I created instructions for writing field diaries.

Ethnographic descriptions in the field diary were categorized into two 'levels', which allowed to reconstruct the events without overlooking the researcher's own experience. The quality criterion for the field diary was that the written material should be intelligible to readers without any need for clarifying questions. This ensured that non-field researchers could comprehend descriptive accounts.

The duration of the fieldwork varied from a few work shifts to a few weeks, with the longest fieldwork lasting one and a half months. The researchers were not restricted in what they chose to focus on or participate in, which allowed us to collect extensive ethnographic data on various workplaces.

The ethnographers acted like factory workers not because they had preset tasks or assignments; they acted situationally and in accordance with their own principles and personal qualities. Their primary objective was to come as close as possible to the experience of 'insiders.' The only significant restricting condition was adhering to basic ethics principles.

After analysing the collected data, we gained insight, for example, into less evident factors that contributed to the high turnover rate in the distribution center (which is traditionally high for such jobs). One of them is the discrepancy between the "promises" made by employers during job interviews and the actual level of process

management that determines the organization of the workplace. The promises were formulated in accordance with a neoliberal logic, predicated on the idea that individual effort and productivity directly correspond to one's earnings, and that the responsibility for the worker's financial merit lies exclusively with one. Put simply, "it's up to you," i.e. the faster and longer you work, the more you earn.

However, in practice, workers encounter the challenges of both a dysfunctional infrastructure and flawed processes, which could impede their ability to complete their shift assignments. In the course of researching distribution center workplaces, I have repeatedly observed the workers' apparent "mastery" in the face of the wear and tear or dysfunctional infrastructure.

Consequently, the implementation of 'observant participation' as the primary method—which entails the researcher's reflection upon their role as a worker—in conjunction with teamwork, allowed us to obtain quite exhaustive ethnographic descriptions, despite the shorter work period than in traditional EWW.

### **Statements to be defended**

1. The systematization of existing principles, procedures, and practices in ethnographic research on work and the workplace has shown that:

1) In foreign research papers written in English, EWW is used in extensive field research which encompasses various professional environments.

2) The majority of the authors did, in fact, implement the method of 'observant participation' to some extent, even if they did not explicitly define it as such.

3) Research publications following completed EWW are subsequently analyzed by scholars who study labor and workplaces, allowing for the examination of main theoretical concepts.

4) In recent years, there has been a reflective shift from 'participant observation' to 'observant participation.'

2. The use of the 'participant observation' method enables the researcher to explore their own experiences, expanding the heuristic potential of observation as a method. In EWW, this becomes one of the key research resources, as assuming the role of a worker entails immersion in the 'culture' in the workplace ('culture' as the norms and rules that structure the daily life of workers, but they hardly reflect upon them).

For example, by objectifying their own experience as a 'newcomer' in a new workplace, researchers can analyze the elements of 'informal culture' and how it can be learned. Using my research on factory labor as an example, I demonstrate how ethnographic research based on 'observant participation' allows for the conceptualization and description of workers' 'craftsmanship.'

3. The methodological toolkit developed for collective (or 'rapid') ethnography of work and the workplace is based on collaborative — involving both fieldworkers and non-field researchers — production of field diaries 'for others.' This approach offers several advantages, the primary one being the opportunity to reduce fieldwork time.

The co-production of field notes differs from the classical/traditional approach of writing an ethnographic diary 'for oneself' or the practice of collective fieldwork/ethnography with all team members working in the field and writing field diaries, which is common in Russian sociology. It allows:

- to make the descriptions more 'descriptive' and intelligible (i.e. non-field researchers have no problem understanding them);
- to immerse other participants into the field in the course of conducting observations and providing descriptions;
- to ensure greater efficiency of such observations within a shorter time frame by having other team members engaged in methodological and organizational support of their colleagues' fieldwork and in constructing denser and 'thicker' descriptions.

This becomes crucial in ethnographic research of the workplace because:

- external restrictions may limit participation in fieldwork. For example, if it is within-case research where the object of study is a single organization, it can be challenging for all team members to gain employment there.

- even short-term fieldwork (ranging from several weeks to 1.5 months) can be a demanding endeavor for the field researcher when conducted through the method of 'observant participation'. If the rest of the team members engage in producing of descriptions and supporting fieldworkers by other means, it can alleviate some of the burden from the field researcher.

4. The proposed methodological toolkit was tested successfully in a series of empirical workplace research on distribution center (DC) employees. I was a non-field team member who assisted other researchers in their fieldwork and participated in the co-production of field diaries (at different times, the team size varied from 1 to 10 research members).

Since this approach was geared to the experience of newcomers, it allowed:

- to describe hiring process (candidate's response to a job posting, interview process, employment procedures, training, etc.);

- to describe the process of familiarizing with the workplace;

- to arrive at a series of theoretical conclusions regarding the organization of the workplace of distribution center workers (both marketplace and food retail DCs). The fieldwork was expected to last only one week to 1.5 months; however, thanks to the participatory position of the researchers, it was possible to collect data on what the DC workplace basically is.

### **Scientific novelty of the dissertation (contribution to the development of the subject field)**

1. The systematic review of existing principles, procedures, and practices of ethnographic workplace research has revealed key thematic areas, disciplinary characteristics, and theoretical developments in ethnographic workplace studies. The



review of approaches to ethnographic research in Russian sociology has discovered a significant gap in workplace studies in Russia, specifically, the lack of methodological tools for the comprehensive description and analysis of relations and processes in the workplace.

2. The conceptualization of ethnographic workplace research has indicated opportunities within sociology of work that are less successfully obtained using other approaches. As part of the contribution to the existing studies on work and the workplace in Russia, it has been suggested that research can be directed not only ‘outwards’, by observing the surrounding social environment, but also towards the researcher's own participant experience. The theoretical outcomes of such an approach have been established.

3. It has been demonstrated that the developed and tested methodological approach allows to overcome the main limitation of ethnographic workplace research approach, namely, the long duration of fieldwork. Through the use of the ‘participant observation’ method and collective efforts in co-producing field diaries, it is possible to collect descriptive and reflective ethnographic data even in a relatively short period of time.

**List of academic publications by the dissertation author where main results of the dissertation research are presented (in Russian):**

1. Pinchuk O.V. ‘Partisanship’ at the late Soviet factory through the prism of A.N. Alekseev's dramatic sociology // Interaction. Interview. Interpretation. 2022. № 14 (3). P. 77–96.
2. Pinchuk O.V. Workmanship: ‘task orientation’ and ‘coping’ with worn-out equipment at the Iriski Candy Factory // Anthropological Forum. 2022. № 54. P. 68–92.
3. Pinchuk O.V. How is ethnographic research on labor possible in Russia? The demarginalization of ethnography in the field of applied research // Sociology of

**List of other publications by the dissertation author directly related to the research findings (in Russian):**

1. Pinchuk O.V. Failures and breakdowns: an ethnographic study of factory workers' labor. Common place, 2021. 208 p.

**List of expert articles of the dissertation author where main results of the dissertation research are presented for general audience (in Russian):**

1. Pinchuk O.V. Workplace ethnography of distribution center workers: methodological remarks // Interaction. Interview. Interpretation. 2022. V. 14. № 3. P. 31–34
2. Pinchuk O.V. Ethnography of work. Trying to see the invisible // Sociodigger. 2022. V. 3. № 10-11 (22). P. 34–38.

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