

Outsider to Insider: Changing Methods in a Lab Study

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In this poster I reflect on my long-term participant-observation ethnography in a neuroscience lab (“Lab X”), which studies age-related neurodegenerative conditions, such as Alzheimer’s disease and Down Syndrome. In my ethnographic work, I study the lab’s practices of successfully making and using mice to model cognitive degeneration in humans with these conditions. However, during my time in the lab, the empirical methods I used to study these phenomena have changed in response to my change of status from “outsider” to “insider,” which has produced different kinds of data. 1) As an outsider in Lab X, I adopted methodologies that clearly indicated me as an observer, such as conducting interviews as well as visibly taking field notes. These interviews allowed me to directly question their practices involving their mouse models of disease and understand what the lab’s collective norms of success were. 2) As an insider, my outsider methods became obtrusive: lab members responded to my interview questions as (odd) attempts at friendly conversation and become distracted by my note-taking. However, by becoming an insider, I could be an active participant in their discussions on models and contribute to their planning of experiments. I employed *autoethnography* as a lab member to both generate and analyze data. Giving weight to my own experience and self-reflection gave me access to how, in practice, the collective norms of success in Lab X were made and perpetuated through the interactions between lab members as well as the greater research community. This poster summarizes these methods and their results, and explores ways of making compatible the data gathered during my outsider and insider phases.