REPLY TO PROFESSOR DEEGAN

I am very disappointed with Professor Deegan's comments on my article (Kotarba, 1979). Instead of offering constructive criticism on the report of some very difficult field research, the kind of collegial support one would expect to find in a journal which employs a democratic review process, Professor Deegan has opted for gross and unfounded misinterpretation of the presented material and the dogmatic espousal of a "my-way-is-the-only-way" approach to social inquiry. I will first respond to what appear to be Professor Deegan's major allegations, and then raise some basic issues relevant to field research in efforts to salvage something positive from Professor Deegan's comments.

Professor Deegan argues that I did not define the concept "intimacy." She is correct insofar as I tried to describe intimacy as a variable quality of the visitor-prisoner interaction rather than attempt a definitive statement on the subject. I began my study with the observation that some visitors seek more intimacy (in the common-sense meaning of the word) than others, and set out to discover why and how. In several places in the paper (e.g., Kotarba, 1979: 82; 89; and 100), I clearly propose an explanation for this behavior, namely, that the level of intimacy sought by the interactants varies with the importance of their relationship as a topic of conversation. I do not feel that I must apologize for the modest goal of this study. Professor Deegan is off base in asserting that I define intimacy by sexual relationships. It is simply an empirical fact that, compared to other visitors, women visitors who were real or potential sexual partners were more concerned with discussing the status of their relationships with the prisoners. In other settings and situations, such as the professional recruiting encounter, the gender variable obviously is waived in the process of public personalization.

Professor Deegan has questioned my portrayal of the factual elements in the setting. Her questioning verges on blind assertion because she provides no evidence whatsoever for her skepticism. Perhaps Professor Deegan has been incarcerated herself and has first-hand knowledge of such a complex setting. We just do not know, but let me venture a guess. It appears that some of my findings simply contradict her common-sense understanding of the visiting process. For example, Professor Deegan finds it hard to believe that visitors in the waiting area follow rules of common courtesy in maintaining order in this public realm. She seems to feel that the visitors are
polite and orderly only because they are forced to be by armed guards, a belief which would stun any serious student of behavior in public places. In point of fact, I never said that there were guards (armed or otherwise) routinely present in the waiting areas, nor did I say that the angry Mexican-American visitor was escorted out by armed guards. (These specific guards were elicited from inside the administrative section of the jail.) My point, in essence, is that it is ludicrous to reject sociological findings simply because they contradict uninformed common sense. Professor Deegan cannot be faulted totally in this matter, however, since most of her interpretive and methodological objections could have been prevented if the editors had published Figure 1, which is referred to in Kotarba, 1979: 84, and which was included in the original manuscript.

I have a sense, though, that Professor Deegan’s primary objections are ethical in nature, judging by the unusually angry tone of those particular comments. I sympathize with Professor Deegan because it must be quite frustrating to learn that one’s absolutist rules of ethics are made problematic by the complex realities of everyday life. It is a shame that Professor Deegan feels she must resort to name-calling when confronting another sociologist who utilizes alternative and more situationally-guided means to truly protect the rights of subjects. For example, Professor Deegan rushes to the conclusion that I, a verbally coercive snoop and voyeur, would have recorded visitor-prisoner conversations had the visitors not stopped me. The basis for her accusation is the following excerpt from my paper:

The meanings present during interaction... could not, however, be effectively discerned during interaction, partly because I could not record or “eavesdrop” on the actual conversation.

I admit to some ambiguity in this passage, but if Professor Deegan were even a little less dogmatic, she would have considered the possibility that the reason “I could not record or ‘eavesdrop’ on the actual conversation” was because I decided not to do so for ethical reasons, which was the case. In a crowded and public setting like the visiting room, I could have quite easily concealed a tape recorder and positioned myself close enough to the cubicles to record conversations, but I considered this strategy highly unethical. Instead, I depended upon voluntary interviews for accounts of conversation topics.

The problem of ethics in field research is an on-going dilemma that has been discussed in the literature for many years. The only conclusion we can draw from this debate is that there is no simple, definitive solution. Professor Deegan is correct in asserting that “Ethnographers have a serious responsibility... to be both discrete and insightful about the human condition,” but, as any seasoned field researcher would attest, the practical constraints of everyday life preclude the ideal attainment of either goal. I personally feel that Human Subjects regulations can provide a worthwhile context for the protection of subjects’ rights, but they certainly do not guarantee the protection of these rights. My own research strictly adhered to the Human Subjects regulations of the University of California at San Diego and I cannot imagine much (if any) university sponsored social research that does not today. But let us be honest. To what degree do we fill out forms and estimate risks in order to protect our own skins from potentially malevolent bureaucrats, and to what degree do we do so in strict regard for the rights of our subjects? My point is that we cannot legislate