

# WATCHING THE WORLD GO BY

## Ethnographic Research

Have you ever sat on a bench and watched the world go by? Been absorbed by the pace of life as others live it? Felt from a distance the rhythm of life as others live it? If you have, you've probably already done ethnographic research without even realising it.

Ethnography originates from a discipline found in anthropology. The term ethnography usually refers to research carried out during long periods (can be years, decades) while living/immersing yourself within a culture in order to study it. In Media Studies ethnographic research tends to be carried out in shorter spells of time. The idea of culture is central in ethnography and ethnographic research (fields of cultural anthropology, political culture, cultural studies...). Here we understand culture to be the ideas, customs, social behaviours and norms of particular groups.

Ethnographic research relies on the scientific study of a group of people/a culture with their views of the world, the meaning they produce through everyday interactions, their lifestyles and habits, their mutual differences in a natural setting. The term has been adopted within qualitative media, public relations and marketing research where researchers spend time (hours, weeks, months, years) observing and/or interacting with participants in areas of their everyday lives. Over time, ethnography or ethnographic research has almost become synonymous with 'participant observation' even though other techniques can be used or incorporated within it.

## KEY IDEAS

In ethnography the prevailing data collection technique is participant observation. This consists in the researcher becoming immersed with a group being studied, within a specific and natural setting, so as to understand how their reality makes sense to its individuals and has meaning to them. This method is usually favoured by researchers studying people and trying to understand the meaning behind the behaviour, values, habits, organisation, language and communication of the group of people they observe. It can be helpful in understanding behaviour which is removed to some degree from standardised and dominant cultural forms and lifestyles (ie: behaviour of so-called 'minority communities', 'urban tribes' or 'sub-cultures').

There are two types of participant observation: covert and overt. Choosing which type can presuppose an ethical dilemma. In a covert observation participants do not know the researcher is observing them for research; in overt observations the participants do. It is possible to mix covert and overt approaches. Participant observation's main limitations are its time-consuming nature; and its potential lack of breadth, as the focus is typically on one particular situation or phenomenon.

In research, there are a number of possible inherent problems for the participant observer: how to obtain focus? What is to be observed? How to record observations without changing natural dynamics of what/who is observed? How not to "go native"? How to maintain objectivity while relating to those being observed and how to avoid bias?

Think back to the bench in the street – are you observing covertly? Overtly? Do you create individual bias if you sit back and enjoy the scene?

Or think about films you have watched. More often than not our understanding of covert and overt ethnography comes from Hollywood Blockbusters: *Miss Congeniality* (2000), *Kindergarten Cop* (1990), *Donnie Brasco* (1997), *The Departed* (2006), *Point Break* (1991) – can you think of others?

## KEY READINGS

**Van Maanen, J. (2010).** *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

**Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (2007).** *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. New York: Routledge.

**Moore, S. (1993).** *Interpreting audiences: The ethnography of media consumption*. London: Sage.

**Morris, D. (2002).** *Peoplewatching: The Desmond Morris guide to body language*. London: Random House.

---

## ACTIVITIES

1. Can you think of a feature film / TV series you may have watched where participant observation goes wrong – where the policeman/woman goes undercover and goes rogue? What was the outcome?
2. Can you think of a public place you could go to and observe how a small group of people behave while working on their personal computers or using their phones?
  - i. How much time do they spend in front of the computers or phones?
  - ii. Do they carry out other activities?
  - iii. If so, which?
3. What are you likely to observe and take notes about if you go to a music concert? Would this be different if you attended a classical music concert?