Ethnography and Participant Observation

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Introduction:
This chapter is written by six former undergraduate students (Debbie, Hannah, Helen, Hayley, Christina and Alice) and their lecturer (Ian). It’s an introduction to ethnographic research and its core method of participant observation. Ian introduced us to this in a second year research methods module. We’d never heard of it before. He told us it involved ‘being there’, participating in, but also observing, what happens in other people’s lives. We all chose to use it in our dissertation research. So we became experts on its use in a variety of projects. Debbie studied auditing culture in an international accountancy firm, and how this was affected by some new legislation. Hannah wanted to make sense of the moral panic in the UK over childhood obesity. Helen travelled to Cambodia to try to meet factory workers who had made one of her T-shirts. Hayley wanted to find out what had been lost and gained in the Hollywood remake of a Japanese horror film. Christina wanted to know how migrant factory labourers in her home town fitted in with local people. And Alice tried to find out why young girls were dressing in what were, for many, worryingly provocative ‘tweenager’ fashions.

We’re writing this chapter together because our combined ‘expertise’ might best help novice researchers appreciate what this method can involve first time round. Rather than providing the
kind of literature review plus illustration chapters that established academics often write, we’re going to talk through our own experiences of encountering and doing ethnography and participant observation. Most of this chapter is based on a two hour discussion we had about this with Ian. We want to give a sense of the hard work, creativity and nervous excitement that made it so worthwhile for us, as students. We’d like this chapter to allow you to step into our shoes, to imagine the kind of research that you might do using this method, and the kinds of problems that you might have to plan for and deal with. You’ll have to read a lot more than this chapter to appreciate what it’s all about. This is just a start.

1) Alice takes some unusual lecture notes.

We begin with an extract from Alice’s coursework for that second year module. She used participant observation to describe what it was like to attend a geography lecture at the University. She had to assume that her reader had never been to a university, let alone a lecture. The extract below sets the scene and describes the first eight minutes [compared with five to ten weeks of action in our dissertation research!] A good participant observation account is supposed to allow a reader to vividly imagine themselves in the author's shoes. See how this works for you.

*February 11th 2005, 2-3pm:* Today’s lecture was for an optional second year Geography module at the University of Birmingham. The lecture theatre used is located in the Mechanical Engineering building at the University. This building has many lecture theatres of this size and is used by several departments for large scale lectures. The building is located on one edge of the campus and is built of brick, but not in the grand manner of those in the centre of campus. This building has a reputation as being uncomfortable, old, ‘a bit smelly’ and generally that it should only be used by ‘those boring people that do Mechanical Engineering!’ This year group of Geography undergraduates have been lectured to in this theatre since their first year, and are familiar with its location and atmosphere.

The theatre has approximately thirty rows of benches and desks located in three sections, with two two-metre wide pathways of steps rising from floor level to the top of this ‘amphitheatre’
style room. The benches and desks are made of heavy, ‘orangey’ wood, with the desks being heavily graffitied and scratched from years of use. The wood is slightly sticky to touch, in the way old, varnished wood is after too many coats. The benches have burgundy plastic cushions on them in two metre sections. These are attached to the bench by old, gold-looking pins. The cushions do not meet and have 15cm gaps between them, making students sit in approximately groups of three to a cushion. Some benches are missing cushions, so instead the students sit on the hard, uncomfortable high-backed benches. At the floor of the benches and steps is a walkway into the theatre and a large, wide four metre long desk made of the same heavy ‘orangey’ wood.

On the right hand end of the desk (from where I am sitting) near to the door, is a computer, keyboard and mouse linked to the projector hanging from the ceiling in the centre of the room. The projector transfers the power point images from the computer onto the six by four metre screen on the wall in front of me. Below this screen, behind the desk are large sliding green boards for chalk use. But these are rarely used. The left hand wall of the theatre has windows stretching from the ceiling to approximately half way up the wall. The windows are always covered in thick, heavy green curtains which block the light. Small gaps appear where the curtains meet and it is possible to see one of the walkways out of campus. The curtains and windows meet the middle row of benches and form a ‘window sill type’ panel that extends to the front of the room.

I arrived early for this lecture and waited outside, following the text messages from friends seeing if I was going and whether they should meet me there. I replied with the usual ‘Yes, I am going. Yes I shall meet you outside.’ However, this week would be slightly different. Jo, a friend I usually sit with, was not coming. So, I was waiting for another friend, Gareth. I had told Jo I was going to do my participant observation practical on this lecture. I would be looking at the actions, reactions and processes that occurred in this usually very dull lecture - in which often many students leave in the break in the middle – and hoped it wasn’t because of this that she was not attending. Gareth and another friend Steph arrived at about 1.55 and immediately remarked: “God Al, you’re here early! A bit keen aren’t we?” My initial reaction was one of shock, ‘Have they found out what I’m doing already?’ I passed off the comment with a quick “Oh, shut up”
and we walked in. The lecturer was setting up at the front. He was fiddling with the computer, so I imagined he was sorting out the power point presentation. The theatre was already quite full. This was a surprise due to the mass ‘walk out’ experience last week. It was quite noisy, with people chatting, walking up the steps, sitting down and removing coats, taking out paper and pens, etc. I led the three of us to our usual spot, three rows from the back on the left hand side. As I walked up the steps, I found myself avoiding eye contact. I almost felt that by looking at people they would know what I was up to. I sat next to a friend Ben. Gareth then sat next to me and Steph next to him. I felt slightly uncomfortable already, a little hot and flustered from the walk here, and from the fact that the room was really hot. I got out my paper and pencil case. Gareth asked to borrow some paper and a pen as the lecturer began to speak. It was now 2.02pm. At this point, I started to note some things. I was concerned. What should I write? Where do I belong? Should I be describing what I feel or what I see? And do I need to ignore the lecturer or pay attention in case what he says affects the students?

My attention was drawn to the lecturer. He explained how this lecture was going to be an hour long and put the first slide on the screen. ‘-----------------, ---------------, and -------------.’ “Another fun topic”, Gareth stated sarcastically as he leant over. Muffled voices around the theatre, I imagined, pointed out the same fact, along with the slight excitement at it only being an hour long. Coughing and whispers followed as it appeared that the lecturer’s microphone was not working. He didn’t appear to notice this and simply continued, explaining the first few slides. Gareth’s next comment was, “Oh great. We can’t even hear him”. He leant over again and, this time, looked at my notes. He immediately realised that I was not taking lecture notes, and must have seen his name on my pad. He quickly grabbed my pen and read the notes I had taken. “What are you doing?” “Nothing”. “Yes you are. This is your participant observation thing, isn’t it?” “Nope.” I tried to battle on. “Yes it is! Oh, go on, I’ll help you. It’ll be well funny.” I gave in and quickly explained to him what I was doing and that he must shut up and pretend he does not know. Feeling really annoyed that he found out, and even more that I had had to reveal myself, I tried to regain my concentration. The microphone problems still continuing, I looked around at the students, all furiously scribbling down the slides. I seemed to be drawn to those I knew.
though: various friends and associates were sat in different places around the room. As I did this, I unintentionally caught some of their eyes and they mouthed “Hi”. This made me feel even more vulnerable after Gareth’s discovery. Feeling slightly worried that I was only focusing on those I knew, my attention was drawn to the door. It was my friend Si arriving late. It was now about 2.08. The room stirred as Si, at six feet two, broad, with a shaved head, stormed in with a large sports bag. I knew he had been at badminton. People started to chat. I could hear little bits of laughter and movement. Gareth’s word “Legend!” seemed to sum up how many people felt about Si’s continued lateness to this lecture. This caused me to laugh slightly. My uncertainty was then drawn to whether I was only observing or if I was now in fact participating in this situation. …

2) Ian starts his lecture on ‘Ethnography and participant observation’.

Alice didn’t write this ‘live’ in that lecture theatre. Participant observation accounts usually start off as ‘scratch notes’: bits of information, key quotations written down word for word, and reminders of things to elaborate upon later. These are the building blocks of detailed accounts that are written somewhere else later in the day, while the experience is still fresh. Participant observation’s data are pieces of creative writing based on what you see, hear and feel under specific and often unpredictable circumstances. This data isn’t ‘collected’ this data. It takes hours to write. And it’s tricky. That’s what Alice was finding out. Ian set that practical in a (boring) lecture. It was our introduction to participant observation, and how to do it ‘properly’. You might find this useful...

I usually put questions up on the screen, then answer them, ask some more, and off we go. For this lecture, the first slide asked What’s ‘ethnography’? I replied, “While ‘geography’ means ‘earth-writing’, ‘ethnography’ means ‘people-writing’. This has been done by Anthropologists and Geographers for at least a century. And its central methodology is ‘participant observation’.” What’s participant observation? “It’s research that involves ‘being there’, and ‘stepping into others’ shoes’, as much as this is possible. It involves participating in and observing social life, and conveying this to others mainly through writing.” What’s this writing like? “Cloke et al (2004, 200-4) suggest that, to give an outsider a vivid sense of being somewhere, you need to include six ‘layers of description’ in your participant observation notes. Let’s briefly go through them.”
Layer one: locate your ethnographic setting. “Where in the world did you do your research? Which country, region, town, neighbourhood, street, building and how can they be characterised?” Layer two: describe the physical space of that setting. “How was that space you worked in set out? What were its dimensions? What was it made up and out of? What was it’s atmosphere?” Layer three: describe other people’s interactions in that setting. “Who was there, and where, in the space that you’ve described? What were they doing? How did their interactions unfold?” Layer four: describe your participation in that setting. “What were you doing in that setting? What was your role in those interactions? To what extent were you also participating in what happened?” Layer five: describe your reflections on the research process. “Participant observation is quite unpredictable. You’ll never feel in full control of how your research takes and changes shape. So here you have to write notes to keep track of this process, to regain and/or change your focus and direction.” Layer six: describe your self-reflections. “Most researchers find participant observation quite stressful, and write many pages of notes (along with letters and emails to friends and family) to let off steam.”

3) The first participant observation we read.

Alice followed these instructions quite closely in her coursework. Layer one is followed by layer two. But, after that, the others were mixed up. This isn’t unusual. Participant observation isn’t the kind of method that you can carry out exactly as planned. Of course, it has to be planned and you have to read about it as a methodology. But we wouldn’t advise you to do this first. We started by reading some results of participant observation research. Ian gave us a list of past undergraduate dissertations to read. A year later, after we’d handed in our own, we talked about how they’d inspired us.

Debbie: You get one out and you think, ‘Oh God. This is an academic dissertation. It’s going to take forever to read’. But I read the one about children’s’ understandings of Eminem lyrics and it was a page turner. Christina: I read one on migrant labour in British agriculture. It was so readable and she’d written it so you could actually step into the shoes of those farm workers. You
could really do that. And I don’t think it was until I read this that I appreciated how participant observation could be done. Helen: The one I read was about people in Sri Lanka and England whose lives were connected through the tea trade. It was amazing. It was so real, reading about the people she had gone and visited. You could imagine being there. It scared me quite a lot, actually. I thought, ‘could I do this?’ ‘Could I actually go somewhere and do this?’

4) ‘You just can’t beat experience…’

After reading these dissertations, we wanted to do the same thing ourselves, with topics that mattered to us, in settings that were relatively accessible. Alice and Hannah went back to their old schools. Debbie had already got an internship with that accountancy firm, and Christina had worked in that factory before. Helen was already going to Cambodia to do voluntary work. And Hayley had a computer and broadband. We’d tried out other research methods in that second year module and – even though it wasn’t everyone’s cup of tea – this was the one that we liked the most.

Christina: I think you can’t beat experience in what you’re talking about. I could have interviewed migrant and other factory workers. I could have said, ‘OK, I live in the area and so-and-so said that, and said that, and around the area people think this’. And I could have concluded that, ‘this is what the population of the village think about it’. But, it wouldn’t have portrayed the actual situation. It’s the people, and the experiences, that matter most. Alice: If we’d done a survey or a questionnaire, then we wouldn’t feel anything for those people. But you’re right by their side in their space in their bedrooms, in their school canteen, in their factory, wherever you are. You’re part of their lives. So you’re seeing why they’re picking that top from Top Shop, or why they don’t want to wear that because they look fat in it. Because you’re with them, you understand. Debbie: You’re connecting with the people. You create friendships. The people I worked with were very passionate about that legislation and how it had dramatically changed their working experiences. That created a passion in me. Ian: Did you get that passion too, Hayley, doing your online ethnography? Hayley: Not so much. But that’s what the community is based on anyway. All the people who are talking to each other are having the same
experience. They’re not right next to the other people they’re talking to. They’re from maybe the other side of the world. That’s just the nature of online communities.

5) ‘So, your participant observation was like an ice-breaker’.

Ian was a bit shocked at how strongly some of us felt about our research. But the reading he gave us said that participant observation involved developing relations of trust with strangers, trying to appreciate the issue studied from their perspectives, sometimes finding out quite private things about their lives, empathising with them, and communicating that empathetic understanding to others. So we were bound to feel things personally. To us, that’s ‘real life’. But, our research was ethnographic. Participant observation was one of the methods we used. It wasn’t responsible for everything. None of us used it on its own.

Hannah: I think that point about participant observation being just part of an ethnographic research process is really crucial. That’s why I chose it in the first place. I couldn’t just walk into a school and talk to a load of kids because they’d be thinking, ‘Who are you? You’re a teacher.’ So doing participant observation as a classroom assistant allowed me to get to know them and for them to get to know me, and for them to be comfortable with talking to me and for me to be a bit more comfortable with talking to children because it’s been years since I was their age and knew how they relate to things. It was a key part of the research design, but it was also just a step toward my interviews. Ian: So your participant observation was like an icebreaker. Hannah: Yeah. Christina: I did the same. If I had walked into the factory without being part of the workforce and said to migrants, ‘Can I come round your house please to talk about why you’re in England working?’ they would have been suspicious. They were there legally, but were still worried that someone’s going to throw them out. So I got my job, worked alongside everyone, and waited until I got to know them. Then I could tell them what I was doing and why, and try to get across that I wasn’t trying to pry into their lives. I just wanted to access something that I didn’t think had ever been done before. They didn’t understand what a dissertation was. So I said I was writing this massive book or doing this tiny little school project. There were a lot of issues with team leaders, and management as well, being incredibly racist towards the workforce.
And that was something that they wouldn’t have told me about otherwise. We had to have conversations outside work because they were so worried that they’d say something and then get the sack. So, you have to build up relationships of trust. And I don’t think I would have been able to do that without starting off with participant observation. Hayley: For me it was different. I started off observing, and then participated in the online discussions of my horror film. I started by going through loads of threads trying to pick out relevant things about the remake. So, it wasn’t like a complete participant observation study. But it could have been. Ian: But you needed this observation..? Hayley: ..to get what I wanted to be able to ask questions.

6) ‘I’m not setting it out like they say I should, but it’s OK’.

We seemed to spend the first few days and weeks of our participant observation research noticing how much we didn’t know, how wrong or dated our expectations were, and research findings came to us outside our planned field setting. This wasn’t surprising. Ian had told us that research always takes place in an ‘expanded field’. And, you have to (prepare to) be flexible. You often feel like your research is falling apart. That’s scary. But a bit of experimentation, and using those layer five notes to try to keep track of changes and to regain and/or change focus, can get you through.

Christina: If you read all the textbooks that tell you ‘how to do participant observation’, they can give you confidence in how you’re doing it. During my research, I had one and would refer to it. I’d ask myself, ‘Is what I’m doing academic? Is this the way I’m supposed to be doing it?’ Going back to that book every now and again gave me the boost I needed. I’d say to myself, ‘Yeah, actually, you are doing it right.’ Or, ‘OK. Something just happened that I wasn’t expecting. But it’s OK because this book says that it might.’ Helen: That’s a big part of this kind of research. You have to keep re-arguing your point and reason for doing it. Christina: You have to keep going and going. A methods textbook, and maybe your research proposal, can give you the confidence to keep ploughing on, feeling that your research will end up somewhere interesting in the end. Debbie: You need a basic framework to follow. Christina: But everyone’s is different. Alice: So, you adapt it. That ‘how to’ writing just gives you a framework. I tried to write those six layers separately, but you can’t do it. You just can’t have your paper laid out that neatly.
Christina: A lot depends on what you can do in the place where you’re working. I was in a food factory. I couldn’t have a piece of paper with me. I couldn’t say every five minutes, ‘Can I go to the toilet to write down secretly what you’ve just said?’ So I had to write things down at break times, and at lunch times. And, often, I didn’t use a notepad because I didn’t always remember to bring it. So, I would be writing on a serviette that I found in the canteen. Even when I wasn’t at work, I saw my work people. We went to the same pub. And, sometimes, someone would say something and I’d immediately think to myself, ‘Ooh!! That’s going in the dissertation’. So, I’d be writing things down on beer mats. Debbie: I wrote a message on my phone and saved it, pretending I was texting someone. But really I was just writing down exactly what they’d just said. Then I put the phone back in my pocket! Christina: And the point is, you won’t find any of this ‘field noting’ advice in a textbook. They don’t tell you whether you’re allowed to do things this way. You have to say to yourself, ‘I’m not setting it out like they say I should, but it’s OK because I’m achieving the same result. I’ve just got to adapt this advice to my situation.’ Ian: So you’re saying that, in the beginning of your participant observation, you have to be well-behaved, ‘good’ students. Then, after a while, you say ‘Oh sod it. I don’t need to do that any more.’ Alice: Yes! Christina: Sometimes I’d be thinking, ‘I shouldn’t be doing this.’ But I couldn’t see any other way. So I thought it’s better to go with it because.. Debbie: ..you know what’s needed, don’t you?

7) ‘And you start to put these tiny, tiny things together…’

We didn’t always feel this confident. It often took a long time to get to the point where we felt we were actually finding something out, creating data that we’d actually be able to use. A methodology that, at least at the start, is based on writing down more or less everything that happens and everything that you think about it is not going to give you a sense of achievement straight away. But that does eventually come. If you just keep at it...viii

Hannah: When I got to my research field, there weren’t any obese children or ‘fat’ children or people with a poor diet there. I thought ‘Where are my fat teens?! I need them for my research!’ I panicked and thought I had to change my research drastically. But I stuck with the methodology
and it led me to a whole different view on things. I had planned to get children to do food diaries, and then to talk to them about the diaries, go into their homes, watch them at lunchtimes. I wanted to see how accurately they’d written down what they ate, where and who with. Sticking to that led me to concentrate on diet and what children eat in general, and the different spaces and people that influence this. It took me a long time to see that something else would come out of it. Alice: My story’s similar. You go in hoping to find this big conclusion within the first week, and it’s not there at all. And you think, ‘Oh no! This is going to go wrong’. But it isn’t going wrong. It’s real life and things are slow. Sometimes you feel you’re not going anywhere. But you keep writing these things down that seem irrelevant. Then, sometimes every week, the same thing comes up, or it comes up in a different area or a different space or in a different way. And you start to put all these little tiny, tiny things together that might happen in a second, and they start to form this personality of someone or the way they are and it starts to make more sense. Sometimes, it just takes someone to say or do one thing. There was this girl who spilled paint down her jumper and she just completely fell apart. She didn’t want to go and put her PE top on because she’d look different from everyone else. But, if I hadn’t been there to see that, I wouldn’t have known how she would have reacted at the time. I think it’s the mundaneness of participant observation that’s important. You just plod through and think you’re getting nowhere. But in the end, it all somehow becomes clear. And you find things out after you’ve finished, too, especially when you cut things up and you code.

Hannah: I know what you mean. The main conclusion of my dissertation was something I didn’t notice while I was doing it. But, if you do your analysis properly, you can see patterns emerging in all those damn notes and transcriptions!

8) “I wanted them to think I wasn’t some freak”.

We weren’t, of course, just observers looking for paint spills and patterns. Our presence on these ‘stages’ and the ways we could ‘act’ with different people, helped to create the ‘dramas’ that we wrote about. What people thought about us affected where we were allowed to go with whom, what they showed us, and what they told us. We sometimes tried to influence this through dressing or talking differently. But there were some things – like our gender, age and skin colour – that weren’t so easily changed. Our identities as
researchers were never separate from our data. We made a difference and had to think that through.

Debbie: There were two groups of people in the place I worked: managers and auditors. The managers were the elite and didn’t accompany audit teams. It was really difficult to interview them. So I tried to engage with them by saying, [in a high pitched voice] ‘Hi, I’m a little innocent auditor and I’d like to know what’s happening.’ And that seemed to work. They started to think, ‘Oh, I know, I can educate this girl. I can tell her all about what I know. Oh! The Sarbanes Oxley Act. It’s amazing. It does this, this and this.’ But I couldn’t say to an auditor, ‘Educate me’, because they didn’t care. They were on my level. We’d go for a drink, and they’d say, ‘I can’t believe you’re doing your dissertation on this. It’s the most boring legislation ever’. It took a completely different angle to understand their perspective. So, it was all very up and down. I spent a lot of time finding out how to be, and evolving my ‘character’ as well as doing the research. I just had to go with the flow really. You need to be quite adaptable. And use common sense. Hannah: When I spoke to the parents of the children I worked with, I wanted to make the best impression. I wanted them to think that I wasn’t some freak. I was just a student doing my dissertation. And I’d gone to the school that their children were at. So I felt I had a sort of reputation to live up to. But with the children, I wanted to be really relaxed and casual with them so that they wouldn’t treat me the same way that they treated teachers and adults. Lots of them called me ‘Miss’. And I kept saying, ‘No, no, no. Call me Hannah. It’s fine’. But I could see them thinking, ‘Ooh [i.e. not sure], we’re at school and you don’t do that’. Helen: In Cambodia, I was treated as the rich western white-skinned girl. People thought I was too young to be travelling on my own. People would say, ‘Your parents are OK with you coming out here? Are you from a good family?’ When we visited a compound where some of the factory workers lived, it attracted almost the whole village. And there was this one lady who asked, ‘Could I come back to England with you? Could I be your servant?’ And I was like ‘Oh my God! We don’t have servants. I do my own washing. I clean my own house.’ And she just couldn’t understand it at all. It was seriously bizarre. Hayley: It’s so different online! You can be whoever you want to be. You never know if someone is telling the truth because you can’t see them, can’t look in their
eyes. And, because you have time to think about what you’re saying, you can premeditate your answers completely.

9) ‘You’re not neutral at all, inside’.

Most of us act differently with different people in ‘real life’. We may be quite good at it. But, as a researcher, you don’t want that difference to be too controversial. If, you’re trying to appreciate what it’s like to live other people’s lives, you don’t want to jeopardise this by correcting or disagreeing with them, or breaking confidences. It could cause them embarrassment or harm - to most, that’s ‘unethical’ - and ruin your research. So you usually have to agree with everyone, [almost] regardless of what they say. This is hard to deal with, especially when your research is changing you.

Christina: When I interviewed the British workers in the factory, some of them were incredibly racist about the migrants, and my initial reaction was [sharp intake of breath] ‘You can’t say that!’ I’d feel like defending the migrants and the relationships that I’d built with them. Alice: It’s difficult to put your morals aside, sometimes. There was a time when I was thinking ‘Maybe I can tell these parents what I think of them’. But you can’t. You can’t rat people out to their parents, or vice versa, because you’ve said you’re not going to do that. But, if I was shopping with the girls and they’d say, ‘Oh no, I look fat in that’, I would want to say, ‘No you won’t’. And I did because I became their friend. These issues can relate straight back to your childhood or the way you felt about yourself at that age or the way your friends said things to you. And you feel like, in this stupid way, you want to make a difference to them and say ‘Don’t worry about this stuff. It’s completely irrelevant’. But you can’t. Hannah: I had to stop myself from being judgemental. When a parent would say, ‘I don’t give them bad treats. But we do go to McDonald’s on special occasions’, I’d be thinking, “Duh, that’s giving kids a treat that’s bad food. They’re going to associate bad food with good things, with reward.” But you can’t say that. I had to be totally neutral on everything. Alice: But, you’re not neutral at all inside. Ian: So, sometimes you’d be saying one thing out loud but, in your head, screaming something else. Helen: Yeah. But sometimes I couldn’t keep it in. I was so close to tears that it was obvious to everyone there. There was this guy who lived in this tiny house with his wife and daughter. His
wife also worked in a garment factory. He came across and wanted to interrogate me about what I’d found out. Like, ‘How much do people get paid here?’ I did my best to answer his questions. We spoke through a translator and used very basic English. He started telling me about how he worked in his factory’s ironing department and sometimes had to work from seven in the morning until three the next afternoon. He told me that they got a little package of rice to keep them going through the night. Then he said that sometimes he’d be so tired he’d iron over his hand. And he was smiling when he said it. His daughter was running around outside. She was peering in at me and my friend. She was so intrigued by us. And then he told me that he can’t afford to send her to school. It was just so real. The initial aim of my research was to identify the people in Cambodia who had made my t-shirt. But it turned out more that I was identifying with them. That turned out to be a big theme in my dissertation. Alice: But that takes it right back to ‘Why do participant observation?’ If I’d read that, I’d feel just as awful as I do now. You couldn’t have done that with a survey or a questionnaire. You have to be there, seeing that man and seeing his daughter.

10) ‘You can’t hide behind posh words, can you?’

We wanted to write up our ethnographic research so that it could have the same kind of effect that those dissertations had had on us a year before. But we were used to writing only in the third person. This made things tricky again, because only the first two layers of our notes were like this. The rest were so personal. So Ian told us to write in the first person. Set out your perspectives and try to pass on and compare the perspectives of those with whom you’ve done your research. Make this writing vivid, academic and situated. That took some doing.

Christina: I wrote in my dissertation that I wanted it to be accessible to geographers, to non-geographers, to the migrants, and to the other people that worked in the factory. I wanted them to be able to pick it up and read it. They’re not going to completely get the literature review and the methodology. But the majority of it, the analysis definitely, is me talking about my experiences in that factory. Everything is in my voice or their voice. So they could see where it’s going and they can follow it. My Mum read it and said to me, ‘I really understand where you’re coming
from. And I can step into their shoes. I can step into your shoes.’ Ian: Does that mean it’s not as clever as that other stuff, though? Someone might say, ‘It’s just description’. ‘It’s not scholarly’.

Christina: It is though. There’s no other way you can access the things you want to access. So how can it not be academic? Hayley: But also, it’s about linking your own lived experiences to academic ideas. You can show that you understand it more when you can link it to your own life.

Debbie: I think some people would find that very hard to do. Helen: To start with, it is hard. Christina: I think you have to get over a sort of mental block. Alice: It’s about feeling alright to put what’s there in the ‘real world’, there in your notes and then in your dissertation. Throughout school, and at university to an extent, you’re not allowed to give your opinion as if it was alright. You had to give Joe Bloggs’ or someone other academic’s opinion. They wrote in a difficult way to understand. And you wrote like that too. When you’re doing your participant observation, you have to explain what a classroom looks like because you know it’s important. But, at the back of your mind, you have this person saying, ‘What are you doing? This is ridiculous. I don’t need to know this.’ Debbie: That’s why, when I wrote the my draft, I thought my interview material was more solid. They’d actually told me that. But I didn’t use my participant observation notes. I just thought, ‘This is just me sitting on the train writing everything that happened throughout my day. That’s irrelevant.’ Alice: Before, no one ever said that you writing something down serves as evidence or ‘data’. But, you come to realise that that’s just as important. It’s the way you saw it. That’s why you were doing the research and not someone else. But you don’t realise that until you’ve read a bit more and your supervisor says it’s alright to write this way. Debbie: But it’s hard because you think it’s going to sound awful. Helen: But, then, when you do get into it, it’s really easy. Because it’s just you speaking, you writing things down. Alice: Once you’ve done it, you think, ‘Oh, I can do this’. I can read it and it sounds alright. Somebody who doesn’t do geography can read it and understand it. Helen: And enjoy it, too. Alice: And you say to yourself, ‘Oh, awesome. Just keep writing like this’. Ian: But did that writing make you feel exposed?

Alice: Yeah. Definitely. Because it’s you [laughs]. Debbie: You can’t hide behind posh words, can you? Alice: You’re not hiding behind Joe Bloggs. You’re saying ‘It’s me’. Debbie: You have to be brave to give your own opinions, link them to your own experiences and to what you’ve read. It’s difficult to get over that barrier. But, once you’re there, it just makes much better
writing. *Ian:* But some might say that writing is ‘biased’. *Debbie:* Yeah. But you can’t give a universal opinion that everyone is going to agree with. *Alice:* And someone can argue with us, if they want. They’re our opinions. So you don’t say, ‘This is right’. You say, ‘This is what I found!’ *Christina:* ‘I’m fully aware that this is my interpretation.’ I accepted that and was open about it. *Helen:* Mine was totally ‘biased’. But then, hopefully, the people marking it can understand that ‘bias’ because I was there, experiencing those things. What I said was backed up by everything I saw. That’s why I think what I think. It’s situated knowledge. You don’t have to like it. Just read it.

11) ‘They might be highly offended if they read my dissertation.’

It was the end of our discussion and, it seemed, Ian didn’t want to let us off without one last question. He said that ‘some people’ think that entering into trusting relationships with people in order to write about them because it’s good for their degree is a bit ‘unethical’ and exploitative. It’s a kind of deliberate betrayal. Participant observation seems so straightforward when you first come across it. But it’s a minefield, when you really get into it. He expected us to refer to standard ethical guidelines and then to get a bit stuck. But we’d thought a lot about this.

*Debbie:* If your participants know what you’re doing, surely that’s ‘ethical’? *Alice:* Isn’t it more ‘unethical’ to show someone as a statistic, on a chart, on a graph, and not let them have their voice, or opinion? *Christina:* That’s even worse. My migrants and Helen’s garment factory workers would probably have never had a voice before. And, in a sense, being subjects of the research has given them the voice, and given them a chance to talk about the situation and talk about actually what’s going on. It’s not big people who have never met them before telling everyone ‘This is what their situation is.’ It’s someone small like me saying ‘Yeah, OK, I’ll have this voice, you can have this voice’. Surely that’s more ‘ethical’? *Debbie:* But I was giving managers a voice they wouldn’t have wanted me to give them. They knew what I was doing. But they didn’t know what I found out. They might be highly offended if they read my dissertation. Their job was to make the Sarbanes Oxley Act look worthwhile. And a lot of people say that it’s not worthwhile, including their own auditors. *Ian:* So you sort of ended up playing people and
perspectives against one other when you wrote this up. *Debbie:* Yeah [laughs nervously]. And that’s probably ‘unethical’. But how else could I do it? I’d wanted to get a rounded view of the organisation and the Sarbanes Oxley Act. A one-sided account would have been bad research. *Hayley:* And, you didn’t use their names in your dissertation, did you? *Debbie:* No, it was all anonymous. *Christina:* And you didn’t misrepresent them. Surely it’s more ‘unethical’ to portray something that’s not going on. *Alice:* Yeah, but some things that are important to your argument have to be left out. When I was writing my dissertation, I didn’t include the way I wanted to rant at the parents. I didn’t think it was my place to cause a big mother-daughter rift that’s going to wreck their lives! I didn’t think that was fair.

12) Final thoughts.

We hope that this chapter has given you an appreciation of our journeys through participant observation research, and that you can see what we mean when we say it’s like, and about, ‘real life’. We hope this might encourage some of you to have a go yourselves. If so, we’ve provided a list of further readings below, and suggest that you get into them next. You might also like to read this chapter again, when your research is underway. It might give you confidence when you need it. Good luck!

Further readings


*Gail Davies’ chapter on studying the networks of natural history film-making would be interesting for anyone, like Helen, who is thinking of doing a ‘following’ ethnography.*


*Eric Laurier’s ‘participant observation’ chapter is a vivid introduction to this method, and is nicely illustrated with his hand written notes, etc.*


*The ‘Doing ethnographies’ chapter looks in some depth at ethnographic research in geography, and provides some ‘top tips’ for those who’ve never tried this before (including those six layer of notes).*
A combination of a detailed literature review and the stories of their student ethnographies (undergraduate, masters and PhD) from start to finish.

A book aiming to introduce research methods to undergraduate students. Ian Cook’s participant observation chapter is illustrated with extracts from undergraduate dissertations. Those students convinced us that we could do this kind of research too.

An extremely thorough and wide-ranging account of research (including on-line research) methods. This seems to be aimed at upper level undergraduates and graduate students. So, it’s not a good place to start your reading, but you should end up finding it essential reading.

There’s a whole section here in which different geographers give accounts of their ethnographic research, ‘warts and all’. These stories are full of the excitement, dilemmas and ‘real life’ that we liked so much in those dissertations we read.

You don’t have to be a cultural geographer to do an ethnography, but this book is a great introduction to the ways in which theoretical, ethical and practical issues have to be considered and combined in any research project. Katie Bennett’s chapter on participant observation is a fascinating read.

**Key words**

*Autoethnography*: ethnographic research based on often highly personal experiences, written up by researchers and/or the people with whom they do research.

*Coding*: the systematic process through which researchers look for patterns in interview transcripts and participant observation notes, to properly identify their ‘findings’.
**Ethnography**: research whose central method is participant observation, but also involves other methods appropriate for addressing the issues being studied.

**Overt/covert**: if you tell people you’re researching their lives, that’s ‘overt’ research. If you don’t, it’s ‘covert’.

**Participant observation**: research in which you write notes describing your participation in, and observation of, other people’s lives in particular settings.

**Research ethics**: following formal rules about ‘not doing harm’ to research participants, etc. but also involving everyday concerns about ‘doing the right thing’.

**Situated knowledge**: all knowledge is shaped by how we are equipped – personally, culturally, technologically - to find things out and make judgements.

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1 All of the ‘recommended readings’ at the end of this chapter are written like this. They contain the kind of detailed academic discussions that are ‘between the lines’ of this chapter. Each contains accounts of participant observation research, plus other methods that could be combined in an ethnography. They also contain theoretical debates and discussions of research ethics, analysis and writing that are also relevant to any such study. If you like what we’ve described in this chapter, you’ll have to get into these debates and discussions before doing your own participant observation research.

II It is customary for published participant observation accounts to be altered to hide the identities of the people under the microscope. Here, therefore, all proper names, dates and other identifying information have been altered. This is part of the ethics of participant observation research (see footnote xi for suggested reading).

iii See the references in endnote i.


This dilemma and how to get through it, is vividly described in Bennett, K. & Shurmer-Smith, P. (2001) Writing conversation. in Limb, M. and Dwyer, C. (eds) Qualitative methodologies for geographers. London: Arnold, 139-149.


All of us did ‘overt’ participant observation. Many choose to do it ‘covertly’. And, often, research ends up being a combination of both. See the definition of ‘overt/covert’ in the key terms and its’ relationship to ‘research ethics’ there and in endnote xi below.

Cook and Crang (2007) review the research ethics literature and provide some useful websites where guidelines can be found. For them, these comprise the formal research ethics that have to be adhered to. However, they also describe everyday ethics as they have to be dealt with when conducting research. Here, it’s difficult to act like a saint, especially when other people’s ethical frameworks seem to be different. Two excellent accounts that illustrate this are Routledge, P. (2002). Travelling East as Walter Kurtz: Identity, Performance, and Collaboration in Goa, India. Environment & planning D: society and space 20(4): 477 – 498, and Scheper-Hughes, N. (2004) Parts unknown: undercover ethnography of the organs-trafficking underworld. Ethnography 5(1), 29-73.

When a researcher ends up choosing to do an ethnography on a topic because it matters to her or him personally, or when the topic comes to matter to them personally as they study it, s/he can choose to do this research ‘auto-ethnographically’. See Ellis, C. (1999) Heartful autoethnography. Qualitative health research 9(5), 669-683. For an alternative approach to ‘autoethnography’ in which research participants are encouraged to write such accounts, see Butz, D. & Besio, K. (2004) The value of autoethnography for field research in transcultural settings. The professional geographer 56(3), 350-60.