

Criminology 321

* Observation * Ethnography * Field Research



1

Observation Defined

- “Observation is a research method that enables researchers to systematically observe and record people’s behaviour, actions and interactions.” (p.170)

2

Observational Objectives

- Observation can be used to:
 - explore a new topic of research;
 - provide context to a study through observation of the social setting;
 - describe a specific place or social setting or people’s actions and interactions;
 - understand how people utilize spaces;
 - understand or explain people’s actions in context;
 - discover silent social norms and values;
 - complement other methods of data collection;
 - provide a contextual understanding to the findings of other research methods (e.g. in-depth interviews or surveys). (p.170)

3

Observational Epistemology

- [E]thnographers typically make this major epistemological point: when they talk about *what people do* they are talking about *what they saw them do under the conditions in which they usually do it*, rather than making inferences from a more remote indicator such as the answer to a question given in the privacy of a conversation with a stranger. [my emphasis]

“The Epistemology of Qualitative Research”

Howard S. Becker

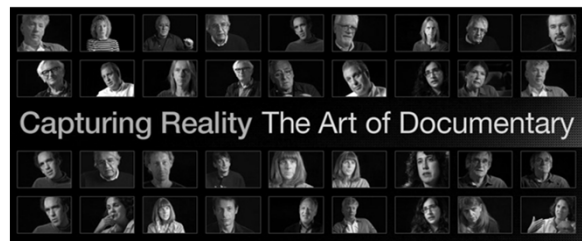
4

Issues to Consider

- Qualitative approaches emphasize the value of observing behaviour *in context*
- Numerous decisions along the way:
 - Access: gatekeepers, guides
 - Your role
 - What/when/where/who you will observe

5

Access, Gatekeepers, Guides



6

Your Role

- Your text distinguishes roles on a continuum of involvement, detachment:
 - Non-participant observation
 - Sometimes on its own; often a first step
 - But can we ever be complete “non-participants”?
 - Participant observation
 - Also known as “ethnography” or “field research”

7

THE FAR SIDE® BY GARY LARSON



"So, you're a real gorilla, are you? Well, guess you wouldn't mind munchin' down a few beetle grubs, would you? ... In fact, we wanna see you chug 'em!"

8

Your Role

- Four levels of participant observation :
 - Passive participation
 - No interaction; merely observe and record
 - Moderate participation
 - Mixing participation and observation
 - Active participation
 - Doing what others do
 - Complete participation
 - Total involvement; often live on site; *not* “going native”

9

Observation/Ethnography/Field Research

- May begin with a focus on
 - particular groups – more emphasis on shared culture
 - particular settings – generally these are small and localized
 - particular events of significance
 - oneself (autoethnography)

10

How? Researchers need to...

- Develop close relationships with people they have not met before;
- Establish rapport; keep an open mind
- Spend a great deal of time in a study context; go “everywhere”
- Take detailed field notes; write down “everything”
- Learn to separate observation from interpretation
- Consider personal risk (e.g., if observing drug users, street gangs)

11

Understanding “Culture”

- What does “culture” imply?
 - **Community** – Membership. What are the bounds of the community; who is in/out?
 - **Shared rules** – What are the expectations? practices? rituals? traditions?
 - **Socialization** – How is behaviour shaped? rewarded? binged?
 - **Identity** – What does membership mean to them? Prestige? Stigmatization? Belonging?

12



13



14

Where to draw the line?

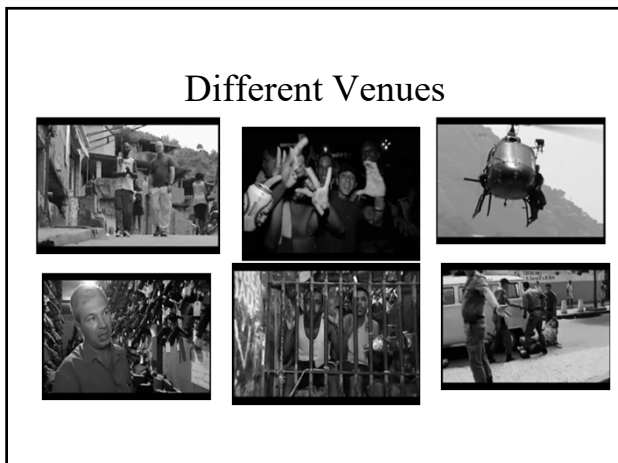
- “I did not get into the car with Mike because I wanted to learn firsthand about violence,” she wrote. “I got into the car because . . . I wanted Chuck’s killer to die.” Nor is she remorseful. “Looking back, I’m glad that I learned what it feels like to want a man to die — not simply to understand the desire for vengeance in others, but to feel it in my bones,” she explained. (p. 263). That might be a revelatory passage in a memoir, or a plot point in a sequel to *The Departed*, but it is an alarming confession from an ethnographer. (From book review by Steven Lubet)

15

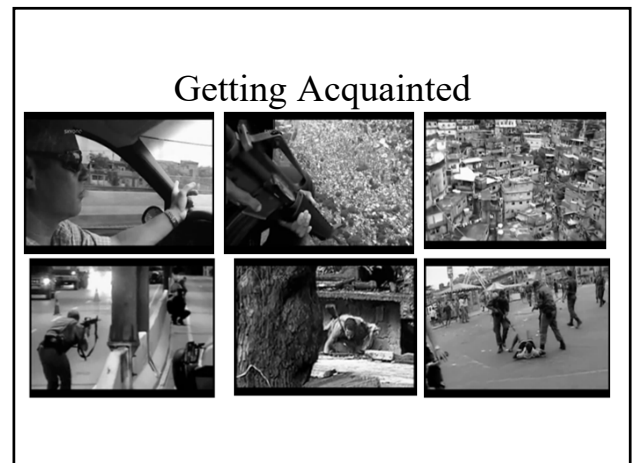
Ethnography

- An example: *Ross Kemp on Gangs*

16



17



18

Gaining Access



19

Data Sources



20

Interviews: Multiple Perspectives



21

How? More Basic Principles

- The importance of field notes
 - Gather information about “everything”
 - Keep it to behaviour; distinguish notes to self
 - Can use dictaphones, notes
 - Record key words and phrases
 - Make notes about the sequence of events
 - Limit your time in the field
 - Write notes immediately upon leaving field; don't talk to others first

22

Analysis

- Straight description is often the beginning point
- Articulate processes – *how* does “it” (i.e., the phenomenon of interest) happen?
 - Instructions for constructing the machine that will make the phenomenon occur; create the flow chart
- Thinking in terms of typologies – people in setting and their vocabularies. Who are the subgroups that comprise the milieu – the regulars; the socialites; the observers; the reckless; the cautious; etc etc?

23

Procedures: General Game Plan

1. Immerse oneself in setting, usually for extended period
2. Participate in a variety of ways
3. Observe while participating
4. Take notes
5. Conduct (in)formal interviews
6. Take more notes (and more and more and more)
7. Analyze notes
8. Write up analysis

24

Video Ethnography

- Many similarities with documentary film
- You start crossing into ethnography when it is cultures or subcultures you are trying to understand in a more holistic way using multiple sources *in situ* over time
- Much documentary tries to do exactly that

25

Not Quite Sure Where It Fits



26

Ethnography at SFU

Protesters put a stop to Kinder Morgan work at Burnaby Mountain
SARAH HILL/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
An environmental protest on Burnaby Mountain in the north end of the city has stopped work on a proposed pipeline for the Kinder Morgan Energy Partners. The protesters, who are mostly young people, have been blocking the road since last week. The pipeline would cross the mountain and connect to the existing pipeline that runs through the city. The project has been controversial since it was first proposed in 2007. The protesters say the pipeline would destroy the mountain's natural habitat and create a major traffic bottleneck. They are demanding that the government cancel the project and start a new consultation process. The government has said it will not cancel the project but will start a new consultation process. The protesters say they will continue their actions until their demands are met.



27