



checklist

- Ethnography always involves studying behaviour in 'natural settings', with the aim of generating adequate knowledge of social behaviour by understanding the symbolic world in which people live.
- In order to understand the meanings people apply to their own experiences, the researcher must adopt the perspective of the members of the group under investigation in an effort to see things as they do.
- In overt observation research settings, access to group members is accomplished through negotiating with a 'gatekeeper'. Be sure to use personal contacts (if possible) to get in touch with these gatekeepers as they are highly instrumental in helping researchers gain access to groups.
- Fieldnote taking is essential to being a good ethnographic researcher. These take three forms: mental notes, jotted notes and full fieldnotes. Whichever form is used, it is a good idea to write up notes immediately after a round of observation before engaging in further interaction.
- It is important not to misrepresent the generalisability of findings from one setting. Ethnography's demanding nature means you are seldom in a position to claim that findings generalise to all such settings. The compensation for this is the depth of understanding gained of that one setting, which can be a rich source of ideas for work using other methods that can claim generalisability.



project

This project is an exercise in collecting observational data. The emphasis is on developing your skills of observation and gaining experience of the techniques of recording social events. First, think about a research design before your fieldwork. Decide what research topic is appropriate to study through observation. For instance, you might be interested in the unstated rules that govern queuing behaviour, and so watch people lining up for buses. Or you might be interested in how people interact when they are engrossed in video games, and find your way to the Student Union to watch them. Another idea is to watch how people order drinks in a bar, noting gender differences. Several students might work on the same topic so that they can (literally) compare notes.

Second, carry out field observations. Record your observations by writing fieldnotes. Now write a description of the research procedure and the sort of data you gathered. Mention any problems in using the method and evaluate how it went.

This exercise works best if there is someone with whom you can discuss it and who has also tried it out. When you are thinking over the experience, or discussing it, here are the sorts of questions you need to ask to assess the adequacy of your observations:

- 1 How accurate an observer am I of sequences of action? of dialogue?
- 2 Have I the ability to write 'concretely' or do my notes contain generalisations and summaries?
- 3 Was my research aim realistic? Was it adequately specified at the outset? Was it interesting? Was it sociological?
- 4 Was I comfortable doing the observation? Did I tell anyone I was researching? If I did not tell anyone I was researching, do I think anyone guessed?
- 5 What other methods could I have used to get this data? Now that I have tried observation, was it the best available method to get this data?