

# Overt or covert observations



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**Question 1**

The researcher says that "[i]ntense observations in the classroom and playground area were completed ... [and] detailed observations were conducted in ... lessons"(p. 184). What can you infer about the things she observed and the methods she used to record her observations?

" Qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there."  
(Merriam, 2009: 14)

An " ethnographer participates, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned." (Flick 2005: 146)

The author, Lisa Russell is a young female ethnographer entering the research field for the first time. This paper is a description of " The implications of investigating student resistance and the importance of how the researchers; personal dispositions influence the research process are discussed." (Russell, 2005: 181)

The research was conducted in three culturally diverse schools of Birmingham and Sydney and the information was gathered through observations and interviews. Students in the age bracket of 14-16 years were identified for observation, especially the ones finding the " experience difficult either academically or emotionally" (Watts, 2001; Russell, 2005: 184)

According to Esterberg, ethnography is "intensively studying a specific social group by observing the group in its natural setting" (Esterberg, 2002: 8). Sometimes ethnography and participant observation are used interchangeably. But to its contrary, ethnography "requires a participation observation style of fieldwork. Participant observation thus can most usefully be seen as a means of producing ethnographies rather than as synonymously with ethnography." (Thorpe & Holt, 2008: 100)

Russell being new to the field entered her research ground with no "ideal, logical step-by-step approach" (Russell, 2005: 182). She used her relative inexperience to her advantage.

She started her research by observing students in various classes and free time. She observed them in their favorite and least favorite modules, covering one of the most popular aspects of student resistance. Once the trust between them grew, she advanced to spending time with them in their own comfort zones, which gave her more of an insight to their personal lives. This way she managed to get valuable information concerning their behavior and problems.

There were instances when she witnessed highly disruptive behavior of students, like that of "a male student kick and bash a school vendor machine during break-time" (Russell, 2005: 193) but blinded herself to the situation. At the same time, there were occasions when she found herself caught in uncomfortable circumstances like the time she landed up in the deputy's office as she was with students who got late for class.

Names like the "follower" and "leech" suggest that during the initial stages Russell was not accepted by the students as she shadowed them all around. But gradually she managed to gain one of the most vital aspects of the study - 'trust'. "Ethnographers are viewed differently as a relationship is built up and trust developed." (Cassell & Symon 2004: 316).

I feel her main tool for recording data was a daily logbook, but filling the same in front of her research subjects could make them very suspicious and inquisitive. Although as her relationship with the students strengthened, she allowed "the researched the chance to see what was being written about them" (Russell, 2005: 187). This she did to gain feedback and more importantly trust.

To conclude, I feel the main aspect she focused throughout was to develop a trustworthy relationship with the students. This she did over a gradual period as she observed and learned from them.

## **Question 2**

The author is a "young ethnographer researching teenagers" (p. 193). What difference does our knowledge of her age and personal details make to the account?

"Qualitative research is a form of interpretative inquiry in which researchers make an interpretation of what they see, hear and understand. Their interpretation cannot be separated from their own backgrounds, history, contexts, and prior understandings." (Creswell, 2009: 176)

The author, Lisa Russell is " a young, novice, female, white, northern English ethnographer" (Russell, 2005: 181). Her " smallness in height and build influenced how students and teachers interacted with [her]." (Russell, 2005: 182)

Russell used a very reflexive approach towards her research and took into consideration how different aspects of her personal disposition affected her entire study. " Researchers' reflections on their actions and observations in the field, their impressions, irritations, feelings and so on, become data in their own right, forming part of the interpretation," (Flick, 2005: 6)

I feel her age -" 23-24 at the time of field work" (Russell, 2005: 182) and youthful nature helped her immensely in developing a trustworthy bond with the students. The students opened up to her about their grievances which they might not have done with someone older and more experienced. The researcher's ability to build relationships and develop rapport with subjects is crucial." (Thorpe & Holt, 2008: 151)

Her repetitive emphasis on her age and naivety throughout the paper shows that these facets of her personal disposition helped her to engage in discussions and activities with the teenaged students, which if she was older wouldn't have been able to do. Her closeness to their age made it simpler for both herself and the students to be able to relate to each other. Although, at the same time it was difficult for her to develop a similar bond with the teachers and she felt exceptionally uncomfortable in staffroom discussions. In my opinion, she put in a lot of effort and time into understanding the point of view of the students and didn't do the same with the teachers. But as she

graduated to the third school her "heightened confidence and greater experience" (Russell, 2005: 188) made it easier for her to relate to and interact with the teachers.

This paper also brings into account the "being there" quality. "Good ethnography is about communicating the impression of having truly "been there," of having had "close-in contact with far-out lives" while at the same time making the reader feel he or she has been there too." (Bate, 1997: 1163) In the context of Russell's paper the way she elucidates her experience and subsequently her problems, make it very easy for us to believe and understand her observations. I as a student believed that the intense description about her personal characteristics played a significant role in helping me comprehend her entire research.

I also inferred that as an amateur, she mentioned her young and novice personality keeping in mind that even if her study was not up to the mark it would have been excusable.

"I held a degree of emotional attachment towards some students given the significant time I had spent with them and the nature and detail of their lives they had shared with me." (Russell, 2005: 196) This confession of hers illustrates that she let herself get emotionally involved with the students. Students also, at times would seek for "support and guidance" (from her or consider Russell "as a shoulder to cry on" (Russell, 2005: 196). Since this was her first ever ethnography leaving the field and detaching herself from her research subjects, became difficult.

Russell's reflexive approach and personal disposition especially her age influenced and widened her scope for the study. This nature of the report helped her retain authenticity throughout the paper.

### **Question 3**

Russell claims that her " ethnographic research investigates the complex and sometimes contradictory culture(s) of student resistance to schooling (Wills, 1977)" (p. 181). How is this claim supported in the paper?

According to Russell " This study examines the significance and relationship between class, gender and ethnicity in the construction of resistance. It aims to understand how the wider societal and cultural environment influences the working of a school and the behaviour of the actors within it." (Russell, 2005: 182)

Student resistance is often perceived as explicit rejection of formal education. It is a deliberate yet hesitant activity of students arising due to social, cultural, emotional and academic concerns. " According John Dewey's comment that teaching and learning are much like selling and buying: 'One might as well say he has sold when no one has bought, as to say that he has taught when no one has learned'(Dewey, 1910, p. 29)" (Provenzo, ed. 2006)

The students selected for the research " ranged from truancy issues and students' negative attitude towards school and learning to low self-esteem concerns."(Russell, 2005: 184). Taking the instance of a student who " had an alcoholic mother and [was struggling] to cope with her domestic responsibilities" (Russell, 2005: 185) shows that how a family related

problem can hamper a person's education and make her unenthusiastic about school.

In my opinion this supplement is a conflicting account. As mentioned clearly in the paper it aims at providing an insight to student resistance to schooling, whereas there is not much mentioned about the same. According to my inference, it explores the experience and problems faced by the researcher, Lisa Russell during the course of her research. She at the same time concentrates on describing the methodologies used for observations and to gather information.

On the other hand, she made the study interesting for readers to read by providing examples to support her content. "Ethnography is art, science and craft rolled into one. As artists we seek to capture experiences in images and representations which symbolize reality; in this regard, expression is more important than precision." (Bate, 1997: 1153)

This repository statement, 'expression is more important than precision' holds true in this study. I as a student found the report very engrossing because of the way she articulated her encounters with her research subjects. Some which put her into awkward situations 'while trying to gain trust from disruptive students' made the account appealing. A few others were when she "witnessed students truant, thief, damage school property, take illegal substances and even [asked her] to participate." (Russell, 2005: 193)

Russell subconsciously seemed to be biased towards the students. "Bias may be viewed as unavoidable as researchers often hold sympathy for some

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groups over the others." (Russell, 2005: 190) Since this study was centered around students she preferred to take their side predominantly, intending to gain further insight into student resistance.

I personally would have preferred to know more about the teachers since they played an equally important role in the research. She could have discussed the teachers' reaction to some of the above instances in detail.

In conclusion I believe this paper constitutes more about Russell's experiential data and personal disposition than on its primary topic of student resistance.

### **Reconsidering Work-Life Balance**

Debates: Challenging Limited Understandings of the 'Life' Component in the Context of Ethnic Minority Women's Experiences

Nicolina Kamenou

#### **Question 1**

The author appears to have had difficulties recruiting interviewees (see especially p. s102). Why, for example, might an organization withdraw " from the study claiming " restructuring was in progress"? (p. 102)

" Work-life balance means that individuals have 'successfully' segmented or integrated 'life' and work so as to achieve a satisfying quality of life, overall satisfaction and less strain or stress around juggling conflicting role demands." (Blyton et al., 2006: 2)

" The work-life balance equation" (Kamenou, 2008: S99) is a vast concept covering a number of aspects ranging from career, ambition, family,  
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pleasure and culture. Suitable prioritising between the same helps to accomplish one's goal in life.

This article is centred " on ethnic minority women's experiences of managing their work and personal lives." (Kamenou, 2008: S99). The author, Nicolina Kamenou, collected the data via semi structured, in depth interviews primarily with ethnic minority females. The perception of ethnic minority men, white women and white men was also taken for comparison. " The broader study aimed to investigate best practice on the equality issues but also to examine whether the reality matched the rhetoric of equality of opportunity within organizations by exploring employees' perceptions and experiences." (Kamenou, 2008: S102). The author evidently faced difficulties in recruiting interviewees, since only three out of the twenty organisations approached " responded positively to the invitation" (Kamenou, 2008: S102). Further to this, one of them withdrew claiming 'restructuring was in progress'.

The basic strategy for in depth interviews should be in three stages - " prepare, contact, and follow up (MacDougall & Fudge, 2001). These stages include preparing for the research by describing and constructing a sample, negotiating with the key people or organisations personally, and providing feedback and maintaining relationship with the participants. Initially I feel a loop hole in the recruitment procedure could have led to rejection from many of the organisations contacted. Besides this there could be many reasons for it.

This study is mostly based on topics such as ethnicity, culture, religion, racism and sexism which are very sensitive in nature. One of the main reasons for companies to withdraw from the research could have been to avoid any controversy. They would not want to risk their reputation and find themselves involved in any problematic situation as a consequence of the research.

The firm which withdrew claiming ' restructuring was in progress' was a financial organisation. This shows that the management could have been worried about the company's inside information since such a research could have revealed confidential data to the market and its competitors and thus affected its integrity. The company possibly had something to hide. On the other hand if a company is confident, a research is a good way of gaining credibility and even one of the cheaper ways of getting feedback from its employees.

I also feel, stating the real names of the participating organisations could have been avoided. Kamenou should have used pseudonyms instead as confidentiality is a significant factor of researches. " Confidentiality must be assured as the primary safeguard against unwanted exposure. All personal data ought to be secured or concealed and made public only behind a shield of anonymity." (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000: 139). Kamenou could have most definitely got a better response from the companies initially contacted, had she offered to keep the names anonymous.

In my opinion, the sensitive character of the study and the matter of confidentiality, were the main reasons which lead to the difficulties faced by

the researcher while recruiting interviewees. I also believe, that a better response could have been achieved had the interviewees been assured about the authenticity of the information being published. Regarding the financial company no conclusion can be drawn as we have no proof against them.

## **Question 2**

Would you expect differences between the people in organizations where formal access had been been granted and the " 'independent' group ... identified through personal networking"? (p. s102) If so, what might these differences be?

In this article, Kamenou focuses on " the specificities in the experiences of ethnic minority women, incorporating other groups' experiences where necessary, with regard to balancing their work and personal life" (Kamenou 2008: S107). For this purpose both males and females from different cultural backgrounds were selected to be interviewed. The researcher recruited these interviewees formally from organizations. An independent group of participants was also identified through personal networking across a range of various public, private and voluntary organizations. All the participants varied in their occupations. The researcher derived information from a number of job profiles, to name a few there were nurses, managers, lawyers and psychologists.

The researcher conducted semi structured, in-depth interviews. The main goal of these interviews was " to explore a topic more openly and to allow interviewees to express their opinions and ideas in their own words."

(Esterberg, 2002: 86). The researcher must have certainly got different responses from the formally approached people and the independent group.

Since the exact procedure of recruiting the interviewees has not been mentioned, I feel that the participants of the organizations where formal access was granted may not have been given a choice. Thus, they may not have voluntarily agreed and would have been least interested in the research. They would have restrained from giving out information concerning their organization with the fear of it reaching higher authorities and thus losing their jobs. At the same time their response could have been manipulated by the employers to gain publicity.

On the other hand, the independent group were people selected through personal networking and thus their cooperation was completely voluntary. We can refer to it as snowball sampling. This basically means when existing research subjects refer future subjects from among their acquaintances to help widen the information base. Such participants would have been interested and involved in the interview. They would have been more forthcoming with their response. Since these participants were being interviewed without any pressure from an organization, they would have been more willing and open about discussing their personal experiences. The only problem in such sampling is that of bias. The researcher could have recruited these participants according to her own convenience. She might have selected them with the point of view of extracting maximum information.

In my opinion, the independent group would have been more fascinating and appropriate to interview since they would have provided with more intense and authentic information than the formal access participants. " A key reason for including the 'independent' group was to add richness to the data by looking at minority women's work and career experiences in a variety of sectors and occupations." (Kamenou, 2008: S103)

On the whole, the author managed to acquire a wide range of experiences and data from both types of participants. Thus, this gave us a deep understanding of the problems faced by ethnic minority women while balancing work with other responsibilities in life.

### **Question 3**

From reading the paper, what do we know about the author? How might the identity of the author have made a difference to the research?

This paper is an example of feminist research approach. In such a study " the goals are to establish collaborative and nonexploitative relationships, to place the researcher within the study so as to avoid objectification, and to conduct research that is transformative. It is a complex area of inquiry with numerous frameworks (e. g., male oriented, white feminist oriented, able-bodied female oriented) and difficult issues (e. g., the absence and invisibility of women, who can be " knowers")" (Creswell, 2007: 26)

Of the various forms of qualitative research, ethnography is the most common one used by females. A researcher's personal disposition plays a very significant role in a research, especially when done by a female.

Reflexivity also has a big impact on such studies and makes the output of the same extremely relatable.

In this paper, Nicolina Kamenou, "explores minority women's perceptions of the reciprocal relationship of career demands and other aspects of their lives, such as family and community expectations and responsibilities" (Kamenou, 2008: 599). The author's method in this research is not reflexive at all. At no point in the study does she reveal any personal information regarding herself. There is no mention of the influence her personality has on the study nor of the interpretations she derived from the same.

In my opinion, if the author had made revelations about her personal details, the research would have been more engaging. Even though this article gives a rich insight into the work life equation, it does not elaborate on the author's experience and relationship with her research subjects. It would have been appealing to know her age and cultural background because these seem to be the two most important factors which could have influenced the research. She has left the reader's guessing her identity.

If the author was associated with the ethnic minority group, she could have given an account of her experiences and hence added some personal touch to the research. But at the same time, if she had adopted a reflexive approach, she would have left the readers questioning her objectivity towards the research. We as readers would have assumed that she was biased towards her subjects and thus she would need to justify herself to us.

In my view, Nicolina Kamenou's approach towards her research was very different as compared to Lisa Russell's. Russell's adopted a very reflexive

approach and described in detail the impact her personal disposition had on her subjects, interpretation and conclusion of the research. She does not keep the readers guessing her identity and gives away a considerable amount of personal information which helps us as learners relate to her. On the other hand, Kamenou's approach is far from being reflexive in nature. The readers gain no knowledge about her personal characteristics and the impact of the same on her research.

In conclusion, Lisa Russell's study gave an excellent account of the author's personal impact on the entire research, where as it didn't focus much on the information she derived from it. On the other hand, Nicolina Kamenou's research offered a rich insight to her topic of discussion, while it didn't enlighten us with her thoughts towards the study. Overall, the papers gave me a good understanding of two contradicting accounts in the vast field of qualitative research methods.

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