Observation

What is Ethnographic Observation About?

Data gathering practice
- First person involvement/experience
- Primarily qualitative, but not always
- Can be quite demanding
  - Learning new language
  - Learning new culture
  - Learning new skills
- Always involves going into the field, adapting to new environments, and interpreting these
What we Observe

- Activities
- Behaviors
- Actions
- Conversations
- Interpersonal Interactions
- Organizational or community processes
- Observable human experiences
- Locations, tools & contexts

- Data consists of detailed descriptions capturing context

Known Unknown vs. Unknown Unknown

- Do you go in as a known observer?
  - Comfort level of observed vs ethical obligation
  - Depends on your goals and environment
  - Importance of building rapport / confidence
## Participatory vs. Non-participatory
### Apprentice vs. Fly on the wall?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Non-participant</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• You join the culture as a full or junior member</td>
<td>• Outside observer</td>
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<td>• Carry all/many/most/some out their activities</td>
<td>– Sometimes not possible for you to be part of culture</td>
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<td>• Your observer status not necessarily known to all</td>
<td>• Careful observation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>– Can be confusing, boring, overwhelming</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• In addition, observing and taking notes</td>
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<td>• May supplement with interview data</td>
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## Common Concerns

- When there is a choice of sites choose the one most likely to give you most access, and most useful data
- Enter the field with written documentation about yourself and your project, when possible, and where appropriate
- Use contacts to help you gain access, and be sensitive to local concerns
- Think through what you will say when people ask why you are there, and what you are doing
**Observer Experience**

- Excitement about project and site
  - Abundance of data, good problems everywhere!

- Culture shock
  - Culture seizes to be novel, now is frustratingly difficult

- Systematic data collection begins
  - Have enough understanding/knowledge to structure observations

- Cycle of break and collection
  - Go off to do analysis, find new questions, return to confirm understanding

**Emotional Experience**

- A change is as good as a rest?

- Away from your own culture, colleagues, comfort zone

- If unknown unknown, expect to be talked down to, or at the very least expected to go through lots of training

- If known unknown, expect to be treated as an outsider, and dealing with politics
Breeching Experiments

• Doing something which breaks cultural norms, and seeing how people react to this

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYIh4MkcfjA
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BgRoiTWkBHU

• Can be used to
  – Sensitize yourself to the culture
  – Explore boundaries of your knowledge

Recording

• Begin with your research question: Might provide guidance on what is especially important
• Do not overly constrain yourself at first
• Take notes on
  – What’s directly relevant
  – What strikes you as interesting
  – Everything else

• Space - Describe the physical properties of the space you’re observing
• Time - Note the time of recording, date, time, place
• Integrate materials into notes
• Names of participants
On Space

- Space is designed
  - Intentional and unintentional effects
- Space influences use
  - Users adapt and change space
- Space changes with time

Space: Appropriateness

Space shapes your design space.

- Nose?
- Light?
- Traffic?
- Flow?
- Barriers?

These not only influence the use of the space, but the technology that can be used in the space.
On Objects

Objects shape use, they also set tone

Guidelines to Observing people

• Be respectful
  – These are real people you are interacting with, it is not their job to help you, do not get in their way, be respectful, be safe.
• Important to capture the variety, this determines your design constraints
• Be aware of “Gatekeepers,” manage them appropriately
• Generate rich descriptions, very useful later for generating scenarios, use cases, and personas
• Be honest, separate opinion from observed fact