Observational Approaches to Research (ORA): Advantages, Process/Practices and Analysing Narratives.

Paul Simpson: Sociology

Paul.Simpson-2@manchester.ac.uk

Aims

1. What are ORA, develop ideas about how they could be used and a critical understanding of various approaches.
2. Why use them - understanding of theoretical and methodological (i.e. philosophical underpinnings) advantages of ORA and consider their value for your own research.
3. Answer criticisms of ORA and how to prevent, minimise or deal productively with any problems, including those concerning ethics and politics of research.
4. Consider ways of analysing text/narratives generated through ORA.
5. To address/answer any other issues?

Agenda

1. **Approaches** – ontology/epistemology, sampling/selecting, advantages and problems. An case study of an eclectic approach. Talk (30 minutes).

2. **Answering criticisms**, preventing, minimising, dealing productively with problems – group work/feedback (30 mins).

3. **Analysis** of narratives/text generated by ORA - group work/feedback (30 mins)

4. **Summary** – Q&A/plenary discussion (10 – 15 mins).

Basic distinction/ideas

- **Ethnograph**y – immersed in a culture(s)/realm(s)
- **Participant observation (PO)** – instrumental, 'quick and dirty'/hit and run'? Frozen in time?

In 'naturally occurring' settings or are spaces produced?

Iterative, non-linear and involve openness to unexpected, living with ambiguity and presume dynamic, multilayered experience of cultures always in flux.

- **Roles:** (Gold's typology 1958):

Complete observer → Obs as participant → Participant as Obs → Complete Participant

Covert   **Overt**

Degree of involvement in field/with participants

Approaches: J Van Maanen (1987). Think power relations.

1. '**Realist**' – mirror/underlying reality – focus on '**done**' work. Revealing tacit/hidden by omniscient author.

2. '**Confessional**' – e.g. **auto-ethnography** (bridges constructionist, postmodern and feminist thinking) focusing on how the socially situated, accountable, **reflexive** '**doer**' shapes account of shifting scenario. Can draw on drawings, personal documents/writing (poems)

3. '**Impressionist**' that concerns process or the '**doing**' - how story accomplished dynamically, intersubjectively/interactionally (with people, animals, events, texts, artefacts, technology, documents, materials, settings etc.) Often enfolded in 1 or 2.

4. **Multi-sensory** (Pink, S 2010) or **phenomenological** involving '**doer and the doing**' but avoiding over-focus on visual and looking at how senses work together, including unspoken 'smellscapes' and 'soundscapes.' Involve the 'sensing body' of researched/researcher and 'sensuous, affective (cultural) geographies.'

5. **Feminist** – recuperative, egalitarian and focus on socially caused problems of women (Skeggs 1997). Questioned – differences between women.

6. **Eclectic** – not mutually exclusive - strategic 'pick and mix' of tools available from various approaches to suit the research? Could also involve **cyber-ethnography.**

Midlife Gay Men and Ageing: a Mixed Model

1. **Covert (?) participant observation** (PO) in gay village with a semi-structured **observation schedule**.

2. **Selecting/sampling** of time, different spaces, people and thematic foci for observation – 20 sessions (2 – 4 hours). Multi-sited and multivocal character of cultural experience.

3. **Impressionistic/phenomenological** approach – interpretivism - 'flows of power' (Plummer 1995) but supplemented by an analytical framework involving Foucauldian constructionism (1979) 'technologies of the self' but located in 'fields of existence' (Bourdieu 1984) (critical realism). Dialogue between constraint and choice - beyond conformism/voluntarism.

4. **Productive intersubjectivity** – insider knowledge recognised people and spaces as dynamic and helped produce rich, detailed accounts of bodily performance/movement that were evocative, plausible and transferrable.

5. **Dialogic narrative analysis/writing** from various thematic/theoretical angles and, as an ethical/political concern between my knowledge and participants' – situated learning (Evans 2007). Also attended to content and structuring of stories (resources men drew on to story themselves).

Ethics and politics

1. **Access** – rapport building if insider/outsider or roles in tension – never completely one or other.

2. **Consent** not once-and-for all – renegotiable.

3. British Sociological Association guidelines approve if sensitively handled and no other means of generating stories. See your professional/academic association's guidelines.

4. **Covert/overt** blurred in practice but covert is best way of securing anonymity.

5. Harm/privacy/deception are not clear-cut – "situational ethics" (Goode 1986). Ethical tightrope?

6. **Reflexivity**: **a)** when writing about people/own account - authentic but not infallible. Fay, B (1996) "hermeneutics of suspicion". We transform stories but **whose** story is it? (Gubrium and Holstein 2009); **b)** dialoguing with/learning from a community/group (Evans 2007); **c)** power relations fluctuate but don't over/understate vulnerability.

Group work session 1

1. Briefly explain how you might apply/how you are applying ORA in your work and its (possible) advantages.

2. What theoretical, philosophical, and methodological criticisms would you expect/have you encountered with ORA and how would/do you respond to them?

3. What practical and ethical issues/problems might you meet/have you encountered with ORA and how would deal/have you dealt with them?

N.B. emphasis on teamwork – help each other with suggestions!

Generating narratives/accounts in gay village

Thoughts	Interaction*	Theory
Relationships, language, **reflexivity** etc.	Two men dancing, aged 60s and 20s, Detailed description of 20 minute dance routine. Recorded **mundane/muted** as well as spectacular. Different rhythms and temporal legitimation of behaviour. Form of **early analysis**	Hexis? Habitus? Performativity? **Normativity?** Resistances to?

Stories of alienation

On the various podia and dance floor were many men in their twenties and early thirties, stripped to the waist, some with shaved, muscled torsos. But, the dry ice, dizzying lighting, loud, fast, thumping music and the energy of those dancing were beginning for me to feel like sensory overload. I noticed a man, (mid-forties?), carefully picking his way along the periphery of the dance floor as if battling against a storm. He appeared almost fixed to the spot under the onslaught of the 'high energy' sound and light show. His facial expression and body posture communicated that his whole being felt embattled by the club experience.
[**Fieldnote,** *Disco Inferno* early hours of Saturday morning].

Stories of ambivalence: alienation/otherness mixed with claims to sexual citizenship and blurring of public/private

South East Asian man, late forties (?) well defined arms and torso, tight-fitting, light blue, rugby style, short-sleeved t-shirt that accentuated his physique. For the duration of his stay, (about half an hour), he sat alone with his back to the wall behind a group of seven men. Variously, he occupied himself by leafing through a magazine, leaflets, then switched between a mobile phone and pocket diary. He snatched occasional glances at the group and around the bar and made subtle adjustments to the nap of his t-shirt. When I looked back later, he was practically *hugging himself*; right hand holding his left shoulder with one leg crossed over his knee and left hand on right ankle, foot twitching nervously.

[**The *Frontier Bar*** (older men) mid-evening, midweek].

Stories of agency/transcendence and self-construction

Two men early sixties and mid twenties (?) leapt onto the dance floor, determined facial expressions to, *Are You Strong Enough?* Their Cher impersonations involved energetic waving of arms and suitably contorted facial expressions as they lip-synched the words to each other. During Pink's, *'Cause I'm a Fighter,* they attracted an audience as they punched their fists in the air/towards each other *mock* aggressively. Other dancers cleared the floor to watch, as they began spontaneously to mirror each other's movements/gestures and at one point shook their imaginary though ample showgirl breasts at each other. Their routine covered the whole dance floor and segued into dancing side-by-side, moving backwards and forwards in-step, waving an index finger in front of them to the histrionic refrain of, *One Night Only!* The audience was transfixed; enthusiastic applause followed.   [*Changes Bar* (mixed space) 20/3/09].

Analysing narratives generated by ORA

Lead by research concerns, questions, puzzle, problematic:

1. "**Rhetoric of enquiry**" (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995) – metaphor/analogy, frames, comparison and contrast for the nomothetic/idiographic.

2. **Narrative/thematic analysis** – content (and what's missing) and structure of stories people tell through talk/body. How stories make sense of culture and how people story themselves into existence (Plummer 1995).

3. **Critical discourse/textual analysis/deconstruction** – no objective reality, privileged knowledge but various constructed truths through text/language/performance and involves laying bare of constituents of discourse.

4. **Multi-perspectival analysis** (Alvesson & Skoldberg 2000) – dialogic interplay between forms/levels of interpretation.

5. **Psychoanalytic** (Holway and Jefferson 2000) – 'defended self' (not transparent to itself) motivated by the desire not to know.

Group work session 2: analysis

Discuss:

1. Generally, what approaches to analysis would you use/are you using to make sense of stories generated through ORA?

2. Which of the approach(es) or **others** could you use to make sense of the excerpts given?

3. What do you see in the excerpts/what's your theoretical take on what is happening in the excerpt/s? How did your analytical approach shape your interpretation/conclusions?

Summary: things to think about

- Extent of involvement – can fluctuate

- Choose a style/approach that fits your research but build in critical reflexivity. Think of analysis strategy at various points.

- ORA can generate detailed accounts that illuminate:

  a) the habituated, inhabited/tenanted, mobile body and how the world is constructed in/across contexts. Most approaches can avoid determinisms whilst recognising cultural rules/constraints on agency;

  b) multi-sited, multi-vocal, multilayered, different, ambivalent, contradictory character of narration/reality.

- ORA enables a productive intersubjectivity that can enable claims to plausible and transferable knowledge.

- Ethics are integral to process of ORA from conception, engagement, analysis, to write-up and beyond. Consider how you write about self in relation others and dialogue with their knowledges.

Any last questions and thank you!