

Study Questions for Esterberg's Chapter 4: *Observation: Participant and Otherwise*

1. Esterberg starts her chapter by saying that scholars from different traditions use different names – **ethnography, participant observation, field research** or **field studies** -- to describe the same basic kind of work. So what are some of the core characteristics and principles of this set of techniques?
2. George Kelley, a psychologist, once said, "If you want to know something about people, ask them, they might just tell you." So **why** do we want to **observe** people as well?
3. What is **autoethnography**?
4. Esterberg suggests you consider your **relation to the site** you are going to observe: Is it one you are very familiar with? Or are you new to the setting? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each of these possibilities?
5. What is a "**gatekeeper**" in the context of observational research, and why should you care about them? Distinguish between formal and informal gatekeepers and give an example of each.
6. An exercise from Esterberg: Consider the following field settings. What strategies might you use to gain **access** to the site? What difficulties might you encounter?
 - a. Recruits in the police academy
 - b. A community of recent immigrants
 - c. A disability rights group
 - d. A student organization
 - e. A woman's soccer team
7. When you are a known observer in any field setting, there will be people who were not a part of the decision to give you access, and they will wonder, "**Who are you? And why are you here?**" Esterberg says you should be ready for such eventualities. What are some considerations she recommends should guide your pitch?
8. When people are being observed they get self-conscious. One would think that when they are being observed by a social scientist, they will be doubly self-conscious and might even change their behaviour to ensure they appear sane, normal, healthy, politically correct, and so on. What do qualitative researchers

do that gets them past that sort of self-consciousness and reactivity and into an understanding of a social milieu as it “really” is.

9. Why do you want to ensure you maintain a set of **field notes** when you do observational research? Is it OK to write things down when you are observing? What level of detail should you maintain in your field notes?

10. Melinda was doing an observational study of the social dynamics in a small business. Here are some of the entries she made on a day when they were having a staff meeting that was being Chaired by the owner of the company (Oswald) and where those present included Gerry’s secretary (Serena), a marketing person (Melissa) and three sales personnel (Arnie, Barbara and Charlie). Here is an entry from a set of field notes that Melinda kept about the meeting:
 - *The meeting was scheduled for 9:00 but didn’t begin until almost 9:30 when Oswald arrived, citing “an important phone call that I couldn’t leave.”*
 - *The sole item on the agenda is “developing new markets for our product.” Every person in the room participates at least once in the discussion, but they all seemed to be looking to Melissa for approval whenever an idea was put forth. Everyone but Charlie at least – a complete asocial jerk who hasn’t bought a new suit since the 80s.*
 - *By the time the meeting ended at 10:30, a consensus had emerged on which markets showed the most promise, and Melissa was assigned the task of bringing specific strategies for engaging those markets to the next meeting.*

What do you see good and bad about those field notes?

11. At some point the research ends and the qualitative researcher leaves the place they were in – sometimes for a short period, some times for very long periods – and life goes back to normal for everyone concerned. What are some of the different views that Esterberg puts forth about researchers’ obligations to participants at that time?

12. “You should wait until your research is complete to start making sense of all your field notes because, at that point, the data will speak for themselves.” Would Esterberg agree or disagree? Explain.