

Title:

On the verge of entering the field: Addressing the methodological issues of using ethnographic observation and biographical in-depth interviews when following young drug users in processes of rehabilitation

Course paper

Observation methodology

University of Oslo, Faculty of Educational Sciences 01.12.17

UV9118

Word Count: 3958

Total Pages: 14

01.12.2017

Bjørnar Blaalid PhD Candidate in Sociology

Faculty of Social Science, Nord University

Bjornar.blaalid@nord.no

Content

- 1 Introduction..... 3**
 - 1.0 Assignment 1 and Course Paper Delimitations 4

- 2 Design, Methodology and Concepts 5**
 - 2.0 Using Qualitative Methods: Ethnographic Observation and Interviewing 5
 - 2.1 Project Process and Design..... 6

- 3 Discussion 7**
 - 3.0 Sampling Procedures 7
 - 3.1 The Participants and Data Collection Strategies 8
 - 3.2 Dilemmas Related to Observer Roles and Observer Interference 9

- 4 Conclusions..... 11**

- Bibliography..... 13**

1 Introduction

My doctoral project in sociology is titled “*Transitions, risks and rehabilitation of young drug users in a life course perspective: How young individuals with drug related problems can integrate themselves back to society through social intervention and rehabilitation programs*”. It will be a qualitative study of the lives of young drug users as they transition into adulthood, with an intention to observe changes in their lives as they participate in rehabilitation programs carried out by local humanitarian organizations.

The drug users participate in intervention programs aimed at rehabilitation through one-to-one activity-based guiding and social integration in a medium rural town in Northern Norway. The study’s focus is on processual changes that can occur in the drug user’s lives through rehabilitation. Here, an important aspect is what risk factors and social difficulties drug users may face during this time. In addition, understanding the drug users own experiences when trying to integrate themselves back into society will be a key overarching focus of the thesis. The study’s design is concerned with temporality, and aims to follow the drug users closely using ethnographic observation and biographical in-depth interviews (Schoon, Sacker & Bartley, 2003; Biernacki, 1986; Hser, Longshore & Anglin, 2007; McIntosh & McKeganey, 2000).

Two specific and overarching research questions are formulated to guide the project: 1) *What experiences do young drug users have from participating in humanitarian rehabilitation programs?* 2): *Which factors can be important for young people with substance-related problems, when they over time try to integrate themselves back into society?* The two questions imply that the study will be conducted on an individual level, focusing on the participants themselves and their experiences with a specific rehabilitation program. In line with the chosen methodology, the study will have an inductive approach; therefore, the research questions outlined above may change as the study develops. The paper is written in conjunction with my participation in a two-day PhD course in observation methodology at the Faculty of Educational Science, University of Oslo, from the 6th – 7th of November 2017.

1.0 Assignment 1 and Course Paper Delimitations

As stated in the paper title, I am currently on the verge of entering my chosen field to begin the process of meeting potential informants, and to collect data. Therefore, when writing this course paper it felt both natural and useful to choose *assignment 1*, where I have the opportunity to discuss some methodological issues and dilemmas linked to ethical and practical challenges that may present themselves during fieldwork and in my time within the field. Here, an important note is that even though this is a short paper, it is written with the specific ambition that reflections from the discussion could be a part of the actual thesis or become a valuable guide when writing up the methods-chapter (the intention is to write the thesis as a Monography).

With this ambition in mind, it is of equal importance to note that the paper does not seek to start any discussion on the justification of qualitative methods, or explain in-depth why choosing ethnography for this doctoral thesis. Nor give deep outlines of theory that may be used, or try to explain or problematize possible conceptions on drug user-theory, rehabilitation, or social change over time. Instead, the paper will delimit the discussion to reflections on certain methodological aspects related to the fieldwork in itself and the qualitative tools used to obtain data, including:

- *Sampling procedures*
- *Participants roles and data collection strategies*
- *Dilemmas related to observer roles and observer interference*
- *Implications of adding video as an instrument for obtaining data*
- *Researcher ethics concerning the study of marginalised groups and the handling of sensitising material*

As this is already quite a comprehensive list, it will not be possible to discuss each topic in-depth by themselves or in the desired length. Instead, the discussion will aim to include the above topics at various times throughout the paper. Ethical issues and dilemmas related to participating and non-participating observation are discussed, along with participant roles. The part regarding video inclusion is presented in the conclusions chapter as series of keyword comments on positive and negative sides of video inclusion. As the fieldwork and collection of data still awaits, and for the sake of argument, the examples from drug-user

encounters are in this paper only pictures of *possible* could-be field experiences, made to stimulate critical thinking and methodological discussion.

2 Design, Methodology and Concepts

2.0 Using Qualitative Methods: Ethnographic Observation and Interviewing

Reading Silverman (2011), qualitative research implies employing one's eyes and ears in order to understand what is going on in any given setting, essentially trying to get *inside the fabric of everyday life* (Silverman, 2011:113). How then, can one actually proceed to explore the field using ethnographic sampling procedures? The method of entry could in some ways perhaps resemble that of a professional swimmer, standing ready, to leap forward from the highest platform and perform a number of acrobatic movements while at the same time being watched, judged and scored for an end result. Aiming to do ethnography or ethnographic-inspired studies also requires the researcher to master a whole range of different instruments, movements and skills, and to employ these in the field in a good way. Therefore, one should pay careful attention to the number of sampling strategies ethnography provides. As Eberle and Maeder describes:

“Doing ethnography means using multiple methods of data gathering, like observation, interviews, collection of documents, pictures, audio-visual materials as well as representations of artefacts. The main difference from other ways of investigating the social world is that the researcher does ‘fieldwork’ and collects data herself through physical presence. In contrast to survey research, ethnographic cannot be done solely from a desk. An ethnographer enters a field with all of his or her senses, and takes into account the architecture, the furniture, the spatial arrangements, the ways people work and interact, the documents they produce and use, the contents of their communication, the timeframe of social processes, and so on. “ (Eberle & Maeder, 2011:54)

Elaborating on Eberle and Meaders statement, using ethnography means studying people in naturally occurring settings or the ‘field, by methods of data collection which again are able to capture their social meanings and ordinary activities. This means involving the researcher, who participate directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner (Brewer, 2000:6). Using ethnographic method a researcher may watch

what happens, listen to what is being said, and ask questions through informal or more formal settings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Atkinson, 2014). In this project the aim is to include a mix of both observation and interviews. The inclusion of in-depth interviewing is crucial as it offers the possibility to hear how the people in the researching setting (the drug users) make sense of their lives, work and relationships. In addition, interviewing emphasizes the building of relationships and exploration of ideas with the individuals being studied (Ragin & Amoroso, 2010:122). As this is to be a study of a vulnerable group, the organizing principle of the project is based on the idea that the kind of in-depth knowledge that is needed for a proper representation of the research is based on the perspective of the drug users. That their lives and their worlds must be understood “through their eyes”. In short, that the emphasis is linked to immersion and empirical intimacy (Truzzi, 1974).

2.1 Project Process and Design

The study aims to follow ten to twelve young drug users over time and is structured into three naturally occurring ‘phases’, that follow the design of the rehabilitation program:

Phase 1) Small-scale observations and informal visits, intended to get a sense of the activities; how they work, and how the participant-mentor relationship is established. Carry out biographical in-depth interviews to get a sense of the informant’s background and point-of-entry into the rehabilitation program.

Phase 2) Observing a number of activities and one-to-one meetings (participant-and-mentor sessions) over a certain time to learn how the participants experience the program. Here, some informants might choose to leave the program before the end of the year (a one-year time limit is given to the participants when they sign up for the program). As the informants are drug users who try to recover, one has to be aware that some of them might drop out, fall back into drug abuse or they could disappear for no apparent reason. Interviews in this section will encourage participant’s reflection on current activities, how things are going, and elaborate on questions that could come out of previous observational sessions.

Phase 3) Observations carried out at the end of the year or at the end of the informants time in the rehabilitation program. Here the aim is to assess what impact the activities might have on the informants, related to the learning of new skills and introduction to new networks with a “drug-free” profile. The observations at the end of the study can also give data on the

rehabilitating effect of the activities and help assess how the informants view their future chances in life. The interviews done at this time will try to capture the perspectives of the informants. How they view the process of rehabilitation, the integrational possibilities of the activities – possibility of now living a more ‘normal’ and maybe “drug-free” life? Moreover, discussions on what plans they may have for the future.

It is important to note that the study is aiming for ‘thick descriptions’, regarding the lives of the drug users and the social network around them, which are created by combining the methods described (Geertz, 1973; Kelchtermans, 1994). Together, interviews, participatory observations and documents will provide rich data that along with an analysis can result in producing thick descriptions on the informants.

3 Discussion

3.0 Sampling Procedures

“How many?” is often a question that qualitative researcher ask when it comes to how many informants to include in a given study. As qualitative researchers seeks “saturation”, both in regards to the informants and the number of observations needed, the point being: when do you know you have met saturation? Here, “how many” is maybe not the issue, rather the question is if one understand the phenomenon or if one have learned enough. You want to reach “verstehn”, a “deeper” understanding of the field (Truzzi, 1974). Following such a line of thought, in this project, the ambition is not to include as many sites or informants as possible. Rather, the focus is on a few sites (one rehabilitation program) and informants that are able to provide rich data. Even thought, when entering the field, one would come across many different persons, personalities and observe interesting situations; one would have to make choices on who to follow and what to observe (Atkinson, 2014).

Since the focus is on young drug users dealing with processes of rehabilitation, the aim is to include a number of informants that makes it possible to get ‘thick descriptions’. Therefore, the number could be both a little higher or lower (ten to fifteen) depending on the recruitment process, but it is planned that ten to twelve individuals will act as the projects “key informants”. There is also the question of what happens if some of the key informant’s drops out of the program, or disappears all together. As the program is set in a small rural town, one

should establish an overview of potential informants after some initial “looking around” and visiting informal meet-up places that the drug users go to (cafes, workshops, and group activities). When contact is established, the process of finding potential “key informants” starts. Should it show that the number of informants from the program does not meet demands of “saturation” (Blumer, 1954), there is a possibility to travel to other towns or larger cities where the humanitarian organisation (nation-wide based) have similar ongoing rehabilitation programs.

3.1 The Participants and Data Collection Strategies

An important, but maybe more practical aspect to consider is the time limit. The PhD project has a three-year limit, which makes it crucial to start collecting the rich data as early as possible since the analysis process to follow will be both demanding and time consuming. Since the intention is to follow them over time, the key informants also must be “found” at an early stage. Here, one has to take into account the fact that establishment of trust might take some time before actual interviews or participating observation can happen. As the informants are young people belonging to exposed groups, ethical considerations and the protection of anonymity is an important factor and will be crucial in order to establish the needed level of trust. For this to work, close contact with the staff of the humanitarian organisations is needed. Here, several dialog meetings with the staff has taken place during the initial rounds of getting access to the field and establishing contacts (August until November 2017).

The staff, more importantly the program coordinator, will aid in introducing the researcher to possible candidates and act as a “gatekeeper” or “door opener”. For the participants, who potentially live troubled lives and might be sceptical of letting “strangers” close to them, the need for a person that they know and trust telling them about the research project, might be more important than any written forms of consent. The aim is that the coordinator can recommend the project, but it will still be solely up to the researcher to make use of this initial contact, develop it and make them into informants. Therefore, a detailed information sheet will be provided, as well as written consent to all potential participants.

3.2 Dilemmas Related to Observer Roles and Observer Interference

When it comes to observation, Gobo (2008) addresses some important phases of an ethnographic inquiry:

- 1) The researcher establishes a direct relationship with the social actors;
- 2) Staying in their natural environment;
- 3) With the purpose of observing and describing their behaviour;
- 4) By interacting with them and participating in their everyday ceremonies and rituals, and;
- 5) Learning their code (or at least parts of it) in order to understand the meaning of actions.

(Gobo, 2008:5).

In this project, where the intention is to observe, both participating and non-participating, establishing a “level” of close contact with the young drug users is a vital part of the research and is one of the first priorities. Still, there is the issue of myself (the researcher) possibly being viewed as an “outsider” by the drug users and not fully being able to enter their “world”. How to overcome such issues? On one side, one would want to be able to observe “in-depth” as much as possible, following the informants doing social activities, see how they engage with their mentor in one-to-one sessions, and visit them when they interact with other drug users at informal meet-ups. On the other side this is a time consuming task, and depending on how long time one would spend in the field, one should be “aware” of or at least problematize one’s own limitations.

Looking to the “classics” on the field of ethnographic studies, they often involved long periods of observing and talking to people in a local setting, such as Goffman’s sociological research on the patients and staff of a mental institution in Washington D.C., resulting in the four essays that makes up the classical book *Asylums* (Goffman, 1968). Goffman emphasized total *immersion* by the researcher in the research setting. One could say, that depending on the research situation, the possible level of immersion is “given”. In this project the aim is to obtain the ‘thick descriptions’ advocated by Geertz (Geertz, 1973), which will require the researcher to establish some form of “relationship” to the informants, in order to obtain rich data. Still, as have been reflected upon in the project description, you can never become fully a part of their “world”. You are not a drug user or a participant in the rehabilitation program.

Therefore, some drug users might see your visits and request as “interference” and they might be sceptical about your intentions.

Here, the immersion part is closely linked to the observer role, where it would be important to start in the “right” end (like using Gobos phases as a point of entry). First, getting the project approved by NSD (granted in November of 2017) then starting the process of gaining trust, by visiting the drug users at informal social meet-ups and talking to them about the project, handing out informed consent forms and *then* start the actual process of participating observation.

Managing this “point of entry”, meaning, keeping the informants updated on the project, strive for “openness”, like telling them what types of data you will include, and that they will be anonymous. Rather than making the informants think you are “withholding” information, like upon request, refuse to share findings, or show excerpts of written text or transcripts of interviews. This is an especially delicate ethical consideration, since one is dealing with a vulnerable group in society. In addition, having a humble and curious attitude when entering their “world” (projecting one’s observational role more as the “curious student”), will together determine how well one is able to *immerse* one’s self in the research setting, but in addition it will also determine how well one is able to establish the needed “relationship” with the informants.

In this project, the researcher will certainly encounter dilemmas (both ethical and practical) regarding observational practices and roles. For instance, what if it is easy to meet the drug users, and observe them at their natural meet-up points, but harder to recruit the important “key informants” to follow in the actual rehabilitation activities? Should you give them money to participate? This has become more and more common in studies involving poor and homeless people. Especially in African countries, but raises a whole set of question on whether such an approach is ethical (Marvasti, 2003). Another important aspect is when to have a more “participant” approach, like when the mentor and participant are doing outdoor activities as part of the rehabilitation program. This could involve kayaking, walking in the woods, sports, radio-driven-cars or other activities. Here, the activity in itself demands the researcher to be somewhat participating, as it would for instance could be hard to observe how the participant experience kayaking if you are standing on dry land. Here, one could perhaps think that as long as you are not actually interfering with the activity in its self, like just paddling alongside, your role might still be non-participatory.

The other way around, you could also be *asked* to participate by the drug users, and saying “no”, thinking your role must be distanced might actually end up blocking the “relationship” between researcher and informant (as the informants might become more reserved and you miss out on vital data). In this case, and in this project, I would advocate to try interacting with the participants and establish the needed “level” of trust, especially since the aim is to obtain ‘thick descriptions’. Still, there is a fine and ethical line, which one should be aware of, and one should not forget that the overarching “role” of the researcher is exactly that: a researcher. In recent years, a famous example on breaching ethical lines has become the ethnographical study by sociologist Alice Goffman, daughter of Erving Goffman. Alice, like her father, spent time following people hiding from the law, essentially people *on the run* (also the title of the book she wrote about the study). She immersed herself solely in the project, following a gang she called the 6th Street Boys whom were constantly subjected to arrests or wanted for serious crimes (Goffman, 2015).

In one paragraph, she explains how one of her subjects “Mike”, wanted to get revenge on someone from another gang (the 4th Street Boys) for killing one of his friends. Goffman here *volunteered* driving the car looking for the man in question. As she described it: “[...] Mike in the passenger seat, his hand on his Glock as he directed me around the area.” (Goffman, 2015:262). The narratives described by Goffman, and the criticism raised after the book was published (with her direct involvement in something that could end up with murder), is an extreme example on how ethical lines are stretched to the full. *On the Run* is a strong example of how important it is to address ethical issues in ethnographic studies, both before entering the field, while doing fieldwork and later when writhing chapters or analysing data.

4 Conclusions

As stressed earlier, the scope of the paper and the delimitations that is made, makes it hard to address all the methodological issues concerning this project in full length. The link between observation roles and practices has been discussed, as has some of the broader points concerning ethical dilemmas and guidelines in relation to my PhD project. The intention being that the discussion might initiate or stimulate further reflections, resulting in points or arguments to include in the actual thesis. Still, the aspect of including video in the project is also an interesting one, and should be reflected upon to some extent. At the two-day course in

observational methodology, the course leaders addressed this issue and gave the course participants the possibility to discuss the inclusion of video at length.

Here, the intention is that pointing out (in keywords) a few possible positive and negative sides of including video as an instrument can stimulate to further discussion in the paper seminar on the 11th of December. As the field of Educational Science has had a long tradition of developing video as an instrument to investigate classroom practices, the video technology used now is a less intrusive mediator between researcher and their research objects (Klette, 2009; Janík, Seidel & Najvar, 2009). When it comes to video use in my own project, I list some negative and positive sides of making use of video that could become issues when collecting data:

Positive:

- The possibility to collect data on non-verbal communication and the showing of emotions (like laughter, nervousness, distress, anger, fidgeting)
- The possibility to collect data on the drug users appearance in detail (what they wear, how they dress in different situations, what they bring with them in meetings or activities)
- The possibility to capture interesting narratives in cross-dialog (when several informants are meeting together talking about their daily lives), and then perhaps later in an interview, ask the informants to elaborate on the dialog you picked up in the video session (Atkinson, 2014).
- The possibility to get even richer data and thicker descriptions on what happens in the activities you observe in the rehabilitation program. If relying solely on writing field notes you might miss out or forget important moments during an observational session.

Negative:

- Video might be viewed as an interference during activities, like informants not feeling they can act in a “natural way” because there is a camera present.
- Drug users belong to an exposed group in society and may be extra sceptical to someone wanting to videotape them.
- Ethical considerations related to the danger of accidentally including people in the video that are not part of the study. An important point when collecting informed consent.

- Videotaping some activities might be problematic; especially some outdoor activities might be difficult make use of video in a good way. Can one include videotape in some activities but not in other? An interesting question to pursuit further.
- Practical storing and analysing of the material. Might take some time for the researcher to get “used to” the instrument, but could be overcome if one were to learn the basics. Here, this methodology course have been essential for developing this idea. With both practical routines as well as a substantial literature list that can become useful.

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