

## Book Review: *Watching Closely: A Guide to Ethnographic Observation* by Christena Nippert-Eng

*In **Watching Closely: A Guide to Ethnographic Observation**, Christena Nippert-Eng presents a new guide to undertaking ethnographic observation, providing both exercises and advice for researchers. This book will be of use to scholars regardless of their level of experience, writes Paul Webb, combining solid instruction in the technicalities of ethnographic research methodologies with an engaging, inspiring and insightful approach.*

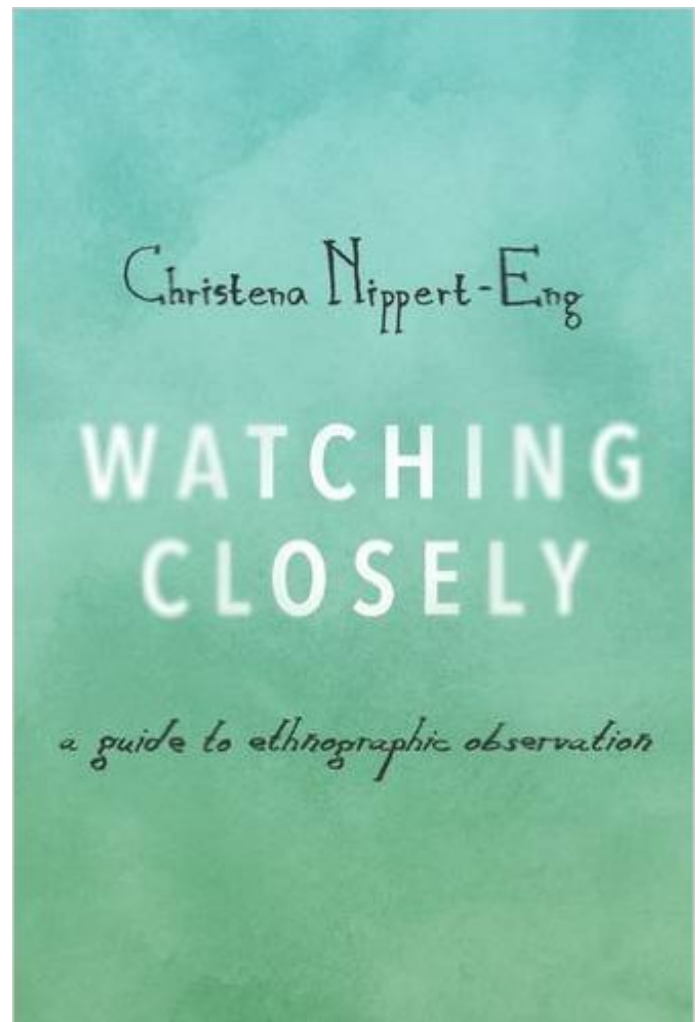
***Watching Closely: A Guide to Ethnographic Observation*. Christena Nippert-Eng. Oxford University Press. 2015.**

Books on research methodology can be written in a dry, unengaging and inaccessible style which severely curtails their readership. After even a cursory reading of *Watching Closely: A Guide to Ethnographic Observation*, it becomes very clear that this book differs markedly from the more usual methodological fare. Not only is the book written – I think successfully – for a very diverse audience that includes students and practitioners across the social and behavioural sciences, but it also focuses on the ‘craft’ of being a fieldworker.

Christena Nippert-Eng – a sociologist and Professor of Informatics at Indiana University – not only shows how to conduct ethnographic observation, but also exhorts the reader to get out into the world to do fieldwork for themselves. The book is therefore both a pedagogical text which explains how fieldwork should be done, and a fieldwork companion, which the researcher can carry with them and reuse irrespective of their level of experience. The author does of course recognise that one can collect data using conversation and participation, but her focus is on observational data because of the dearth of skills in this area. This is an assessment with which I am inclined to agree.

*Watching Closely* is divided into three parts: ‘Getting Ready’, ‘The Exercises’ and ‘Moving Forward’. Part One tells the reader how to use the book and about the author’s philosophy of fieldwork, which she herself characterises as one of moderate social constructivism (19). Modelling the book on a ‘fine arts or studio course’ (5), the emphasis is on exercises in the second part, which focuses on particular concepts and allows the reader to practise their data collection, analytic and report-writing skills. Part Three then brings the book to a close by offering advice on what one should do in order to develop as a fieldworker.

As the second part forms the core of the book, I’ll give the reader some idea of what is involved. Nippert-Eng



advocates 'concept driven' fieldwork (36), with a particular focus on 'time' and 'space' and, where possible, on non-human animals. Her preference for the non-human subject is reasonable as she is trying to inspire readers to observe attentively rather than to ascribe motivations to behaviours, which would perhaps be the case when studying human subjects. The nine exercises therefore encourage the reader to use the author's toolkit of concepts to make sense of data in the field.

Prior to doing each exercise, Nippert-Eng invites us to think sociologically. In the second exercise on 'temporal mapping', for example, she provides a short but fascinating discussion of the distinction between 'natural' and 'artificial' time, with reference to the work of the sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel, as a prelude to asking the student to construct a 'temporal map' of their own. This involves selecting a body part of the animal being observed and 'describing its movements' with reference to time (87). The reader is then encouraged to write up a report of the exercise before reading the 'Post-Exercise Discussion' and the 'Mechanics of this Exercise' sections. The student then follows a similar process in the third exercise – again on 'temporal mapping' – with the objective being to extend their understanding of the concept of temporality by taking account of duration, sequence, pulse, repetition and cyclicity (120).



**Image Credit:** [Chad Cooper](#)

Although this discussion of the exercises may seem abstract, nothing could be further from the truth as Nippert-Eng grounds her advice with concrete references to her own field of study: namely, the gorillas of Lincoln Park Zoo, Chicago. Readers are also encouraged to refer to sample responses to each of the exercises on [a dedicated companion website](#). Indeed, I was captivated by this feature of the book due to the imaginative, creative and insightful ways in which each student presents their findings. The author really manages to convey the excitement of conducting research in the field. Not only will anyone who reads this book and completes the exercises improve their ability to collect observational data, but they will also come away from the text itching to do their own research.

Moreover, the decision to limit discussion to a small subset of problems is wise if one considers that inexperienced researchers can often feel overwhelmed by the amount of data which is available. The problems are also well chosen because they provide the researcher who does not have a clear focus with conceptual hooks which they can use to think about the problems that interest them before going out into the field. Each exercise also carefully builds on what has gone before. Nippert-Eng is therefore sensitive to the challenges posed by ethnographic research.

The author also manages to combine a lot of very tangible advice with a style that poses questions which the reader is invited to solve for themselves. I thought, for example, that her discussion of the challenges posed by the attempt to collect observational time series data was particularly thought-provoking. In addition, the eclecticism of the scholarly sources on which she draws is truly impressive. The reference to the work of Scott McCloud on [Understanding Comics](#) may seem tangential, but it is exceptionally relevant when one remembers that Nippert-Eng is making a point about the importance of storytelling for researchers who wish to re-present their data effectively. The sheer breadth of the sources on which she draws is therefore a reminder of how researchers should work in an interdisciplinary way if they wish to truly leverage their data and understand the social world.

In short, this book is an exemplar of how books on research methodology can, and perhaps should, be written as Nippert-Eng combines solid instruction in the technicalities of ethnographic research with a set of useful exercises which will convince the reader that research is fun, insightful and a craft skill that one can acquire through practice.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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