

**Professor Angela Thody of the University of Lincoln lectures on various qualitative research methods for social scientists, including narrative, interviewing, diaries and observation and visual data, the subject of this presentation. She works with mainly post-graduate groups but has lectured for undergraduates also.**

***For more information about the author or to book her for lecturing***

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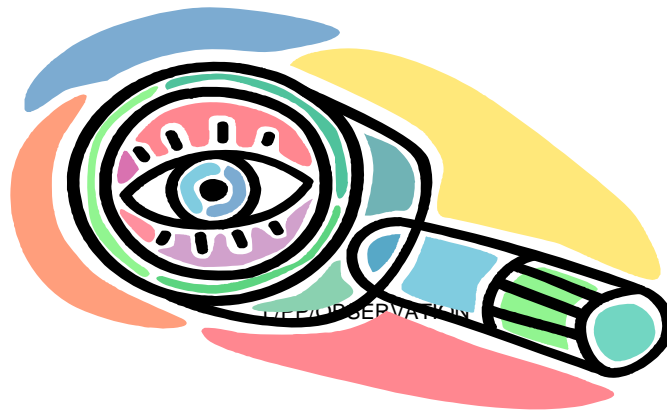
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***Keywords: visual data; photographs; paintings; observation; videos; research***

*University of Lincoln  
Centre for Educational Research and Development  
Doctoral Programmes*

**Research Tools:  
Using visual data  
*Professor Angela Thody***

***Summary notes will be given at the end. If you want  
material additional to the slides, take your own  
notes***



***DESCRIBE WHAT YOU'VE OBSERVED SINCE YOU ENTERED THIS ROOM...***

**Research project:  
experiences of mature students at post 1990s universities**

**YOUR OWN NOTES  
NO CONFERRING  
QUICK JOTTINGS BUT LEGIBLE**

## COMPARE NOTES...

What elements did you include?

*people, furniture, ambience, equipment, vegetation, windows, position in the building, room size, activities by lecturer and/or students, others?*

How far did you focus on the same elements as did others?

Did you describe or comment? How neutral was your language? Was it emotive/normative?

## *Using visual data: observation*

### Structuring observation records:

Data =

- Basics – timing and timed intervals, coding, who, where
- Analysis categories - set in advance or post-facto ?
- Records that ‘take you there’ – rich pictures
- Everything
- See analysis sheets and completed examples

# ***Research tools: visual data – more than your own observation***



**PRIMARY: CREATED FOR YOUR RESEARCH**

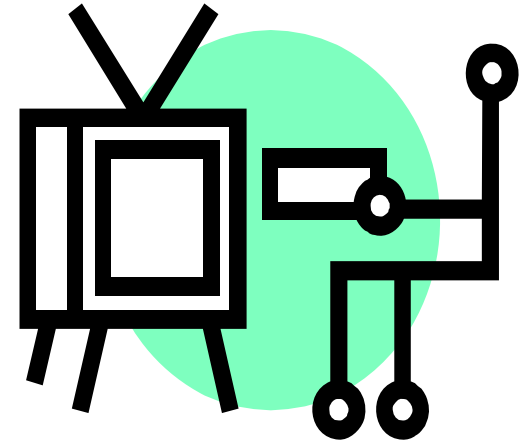
e.g. visual depiction:

video of interviews,  
photos of locations

e.g. visualisations:

diagrams, sketches, figures

e.g. personal observations



**SECONDARY – EXISTING IMAGES ABOUT YOUR RESEARCH**

e.g. visual anthropology/  
history/ social sciences:

**Advertisements, book covers, photos, film, paintings, sculpture, clothes; previous observations**



## *Research data sources:* **Why use visual data?**

**To illuminate, excite, give depth, triangulate.**

**It's a powerful learning tool**

**It celebrates subjectivity and post-modernist  
polyvocality and subject participation**

### *Visual data sources*

**Personal observation**

**TV and film media**

**Pictorial metaphors – e.g. comics, cartoons**

**Paintings, sculpture – artistic representations**

**WHAT INFERENCES CAN YOU MAKE for  
this research project from the book covers  
shown on the next slide?**

**Research project:**

**the effect of school images in literature on teenage attitudes**



ALLY'S WORLD 

# CRUSHES, CLIQUES, AND the COOL SCHOOL TRIP

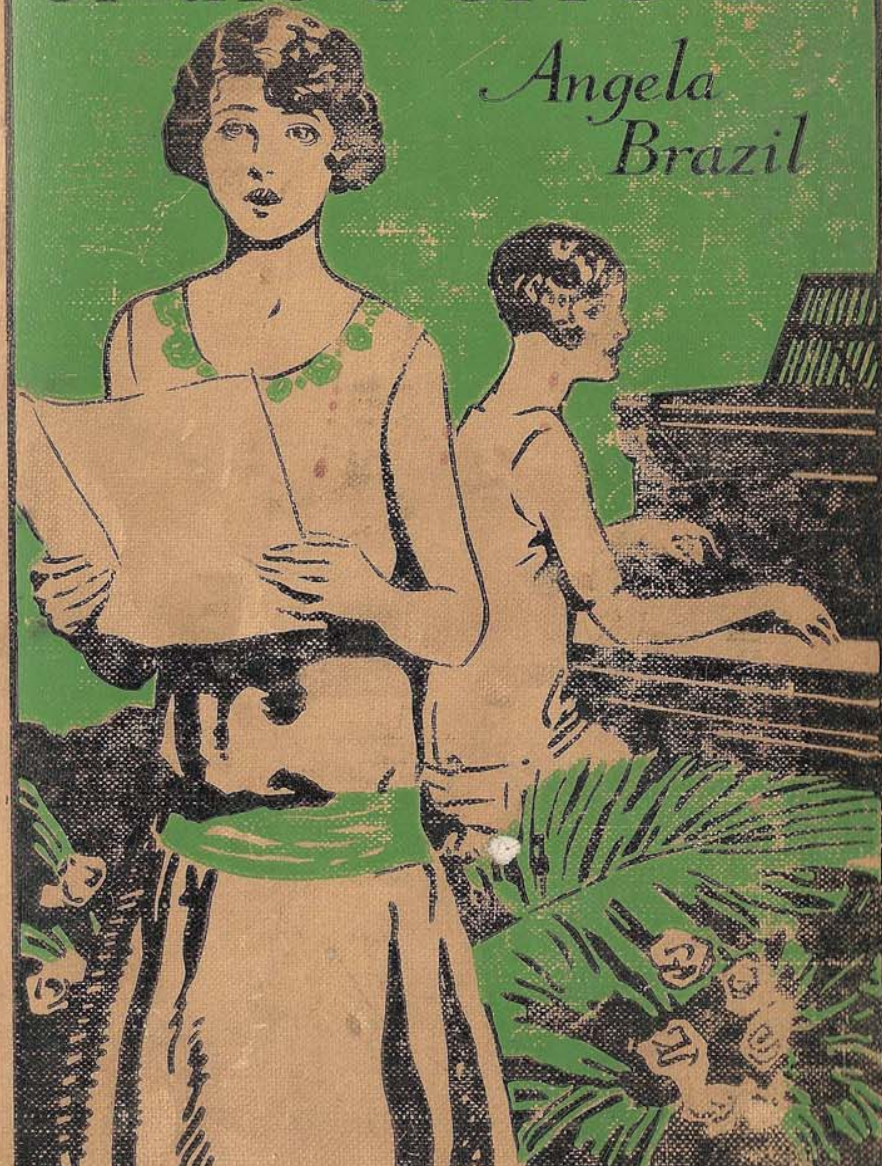


KAREN McCOMBIE

SCHOLASTIC

# FOR THE SAKE of the SCHOOL

Angela  
Brazil





# ***IS VISUAL DATA TRUSTWORTHY?***

**The camera never lies**

**Developed from modernist perspectives concerning objectivity**

**Images can be easily manipulated**

**Post-modernist perspectives = subjectivity (who took the pictures, why, how, what was left out, what was selected for inclusion)**

## **MAKING VISUAL DATA TRUSTWORTHY**



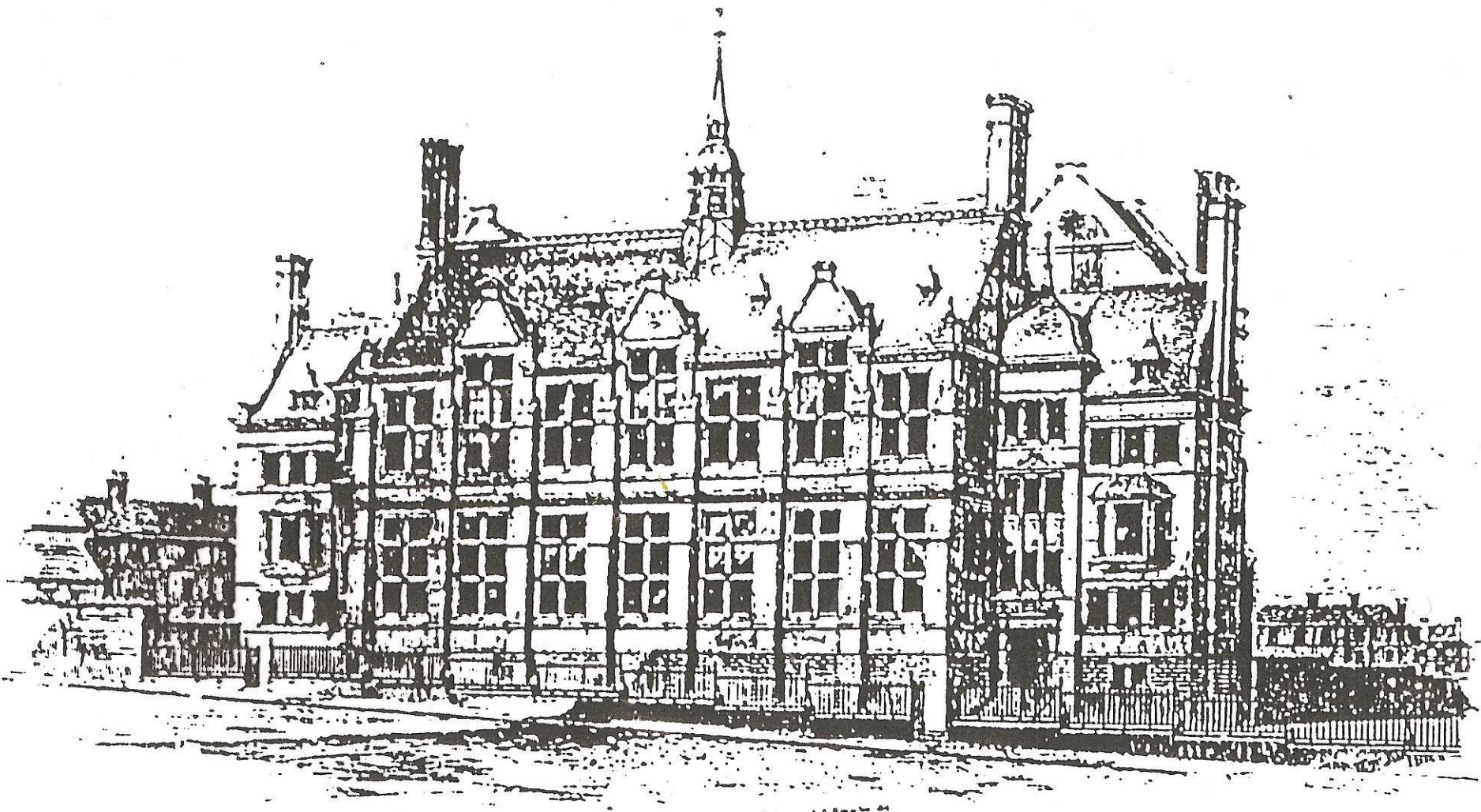
**Completeness from numerous perspectives**

**Interpretation – yours and the readers’**

**Transparency about - sources and your access to them;  
rationale for visual data  
what’s in and what’s not in**

***Research project: the influence of school building on pedagogic styles***

How trustworthy do you rate the following images for the above project?

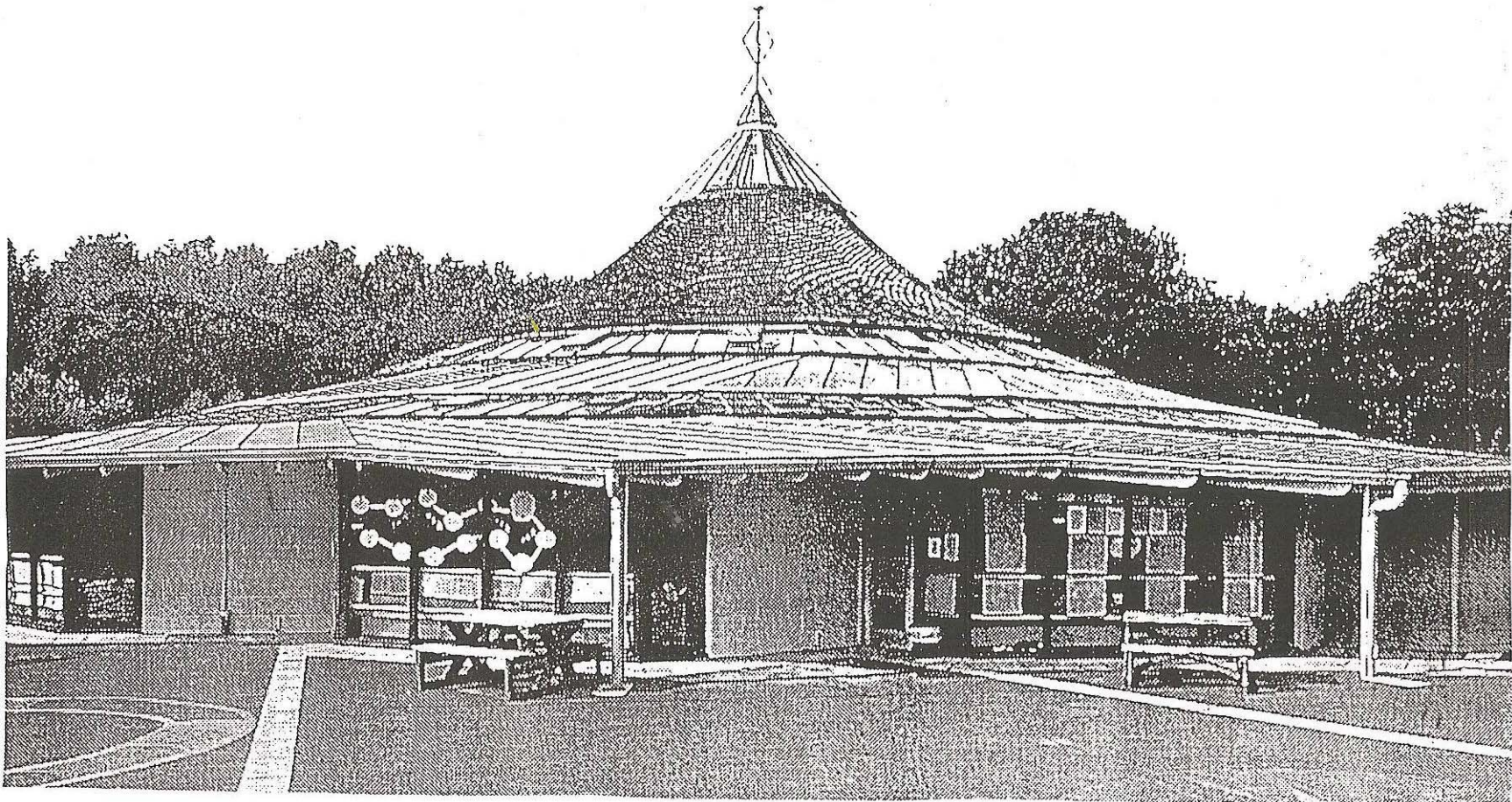


385. THE STANLEY ROAD HIGHER GRADE SCHOOL, NOTTINGHAM.

*A. N. Bromley, Architect.*



# Stoke Park Infants School



## *Research Tools: Observation*

*I have a little shadow  
That goes in and out  
with me*

*But what can be the use  
of it*

*Is more than I can see*

**EXCEPT FOR  
OBSERVATION  
RESEARCH**



## *Research tools: Observation*

**This is a method of social science research in which the subjects are, as far as possible, directly observed in their normal setting and their normal pattern of work**

**Contrast with experimental research in which one introduces variables to see if normal behaviour changes**

**It's a tool to aid scientific description of human societies (ethnography)**

**It aims at a rich picture in words – but pictures can be used too**



# *Research Tools: observation - the good and the less good*

**Most fascinating, emotionally involving**

**Best for in-depth and exciting learning**

**Analytically complex**

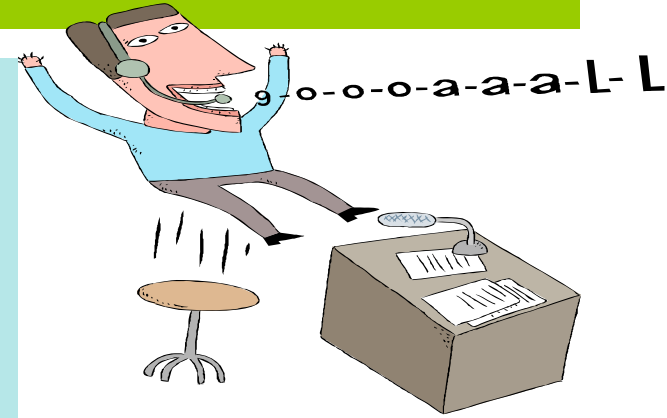
**Time consuming**

**Tiring – very concentrated**

**Phenomenally boring to analyse and time consuming to transcribe – but can use analysis tools like NUDIST**

**Sometimes boring during observations too**

**Interesting presentation options**





## *Research tools: observation*

**Observation for use in research by part-time, post graduate students in full time work is likely to be insider**

- **A member of the organisation who joins in the normal life of that organisation, has a temporary or permanent recognised role in that organisation and conducts the research while in that role – termed, ‘participant observation’.**

**It can be therefore be covert (but mind your ethics!) or overt**

### **Examples**

**Headteacher observing governors’ meetings**

**Estates officer recording student interventions into strategic planning meetings**

*Research tools: observation*

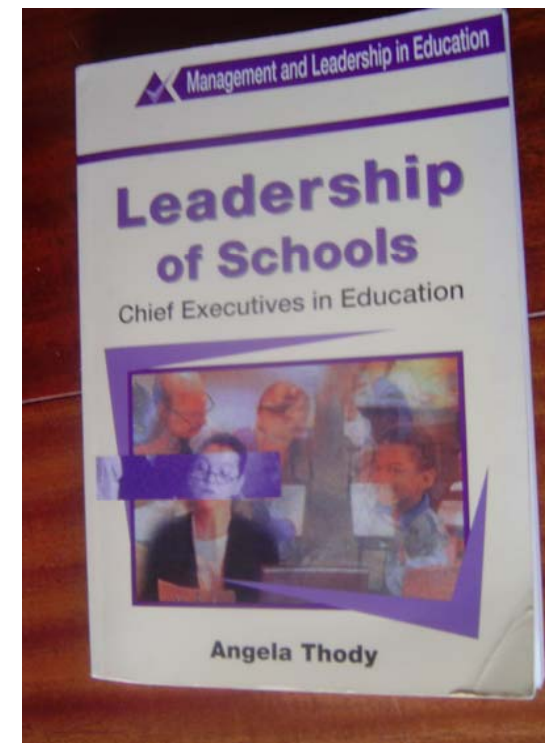
**Participant observation for part time students is likely to be**

**limited to a short period or  
to one person or  
to one focus, e,g meetings  
as part of a study**

**e.g. O'Sullivan, F., Thody, A. and Wood, E.  
2000, *From Bursar to School Business  
Manager*, Prentice Hall**

**BUT - IT CAN BE MORE EXTENSIVE –  
e.g. Thody, A. (1997) *Leadership of Schools*,  
Cassell**

**9 YEARS, 9 CEOs, all days**



## Outsider observation:

**The researcher has no recognised role in the organisation – termed ‘non-participant observation’ –  
CAN BE OVERT OR COVERT**

**e.g.**

- **a post graduate IEL student who visits the organisation of another student to undertake a comparative study**
- **a professor who observes a bursar at work in a school**
- **researcher who temporarily becomes a shop assistant to research staff pilfering**

*Visual data - observations*

# HOW COULD/DO YOU USE OBSERVATION IN YOUR RESEARCH?



# ***Research tools: Observation - more advantages and disadvantages***

## **Advantages**

**Insider information**

**Credibility**

**Detail**

**Takes you to the 'feel' of the place**

**Closeness to subject**

## **Possible Disadvantages**

**Cannot reveal insider information**

**Not easily verified**

**Too data rich – time consuming to analyse**

**Challenging to present**

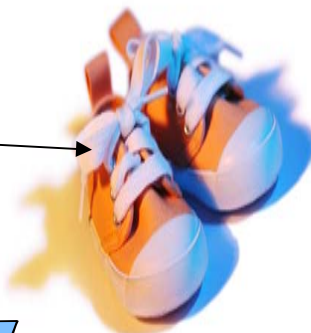
**Going native**

Research tools: observation - How to observe –  
**LESSONS FROM PEOPLE TRACKING**

**Clothes to fit the occasion**



**Comfortable shoes**



**Food and drink survival rations**

**Be where you can see the action**



**Notebooks and numerous pens**



**Don't speak until spoken to**  
**Record inconspicuously**



L/PP/C



## *Research tools: observation- **What to record***

***Describe – DON'T ANALYSE  
DON'T COMMENT***

***Keep each activity separate***

***Note the visuals - body language, facial expressions  
and surroundings,***

***Don't forget that silences speak volumes too***

# ***THE LANGUAGE OF OBSERVATION: a little practice***

1. I AM MOVING TO STAND BEHIND YOU
2. DO NOT LOOK AROUND AT ME

## **3. WRITE A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF ME – NOTES WILL DO**

**Research project:**

**experiences of mature students at post 1990s universities**

**Test your notes:**

**Will they be enough to remind you of the scene in 6 months time when you analyse the data?**

**Will they be enough/appropriate for ‘taking your readers into the scene?'**

**What elements did you include? Was it neutral language? Did you comment?**

**Was it embarrassing?**



## *Research tools: observation*

### **Challenges...**

***It's embarrassing (but everyone gets used to it)***

***'What the hell was he going to do with this woman every Wednesday for the next two months?' (Lodge,D. 1989:116)***

***'Oh Angela's very good at it. It's just me who finds being observed difficult' CEO observed for Thody, 1997.***

***Comfort breaks!***



## *Research tools: observation - challenges*

**Going native = temporary cloning**

**Conscious and unconscious feelings of hostility and love**

**Makes you question your own assumptions:**

***Flitting backwards and forwards across the frontier between...two zones whose values, priorities, language and manners were so utterly disparate, [the observer] felt like a secret agent; and as secret agents are apt to do, suffered occasional spasms of doubt about the righteousness of her own side***

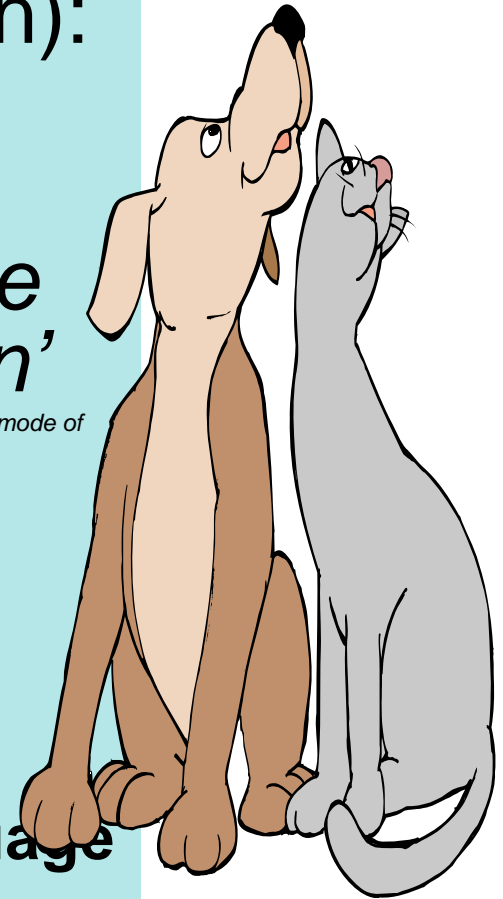
**(Lodge, D. 1989, Nice Work, p. 216).**

## Research tools: observation - challenges

Going native is valuable (and fun):  
*Co-existence is a vital tool to release temporarily 'all preoccupation with self [to] move into a state of complete attention'*

(Heshusius, L. (1994) *Freeing ourselves from objectivity: managing subjectivity or turning towards a participatory mode of consciousness?* *Educational Researcher*, p. 17)

**To avoid the worst excesses:**  
**Don't analyse data immediately**  
**Record non-judgementally**  
**Don't chat with your subject**  
**Use neutral, non-participant body language**



*Research Tools: observation -  
Selecting your subjects and when you will observe*

**= finding the willing**  
**= agreeing to almost anything**  
**= seizing opportunities**  
**= write, phone, meet**  
**= a limited number**

**Your best chances are:**

- ☺ **Friends**
- ☺ **Grape vine**
- ☺ **Powerful**
- ☺ **Opposite sex**
- ☺ **Around same age or status as you**

## *Research tools: observation - challenges*

**Do those observed 'play to the gallery'?**

**YES – irresistible! – David Lodge's manager 'played to silent applause; Valerie Hall's 1994 study on gender found that the principals behaved differently when observed; Thody's 1997 study of CEOs found they felt self-conscious and one said he was 'more optimistic and positive than usual'**

**Both researcher and researched have to provide explanations and introductions which interrupt normal work pattern.**



**Others who are unwitting or peripheral participants don't have time to adjust to the research**

## *Research tools: observation - challenges*

**Do those observed 'play to the gallery'?**

**NO -**

**Most are oblivious to the researcher because they are too busy**

**Thody, 1997, checked after the observations to find that the subjects were reported to 'always work at this pace', 'always swear like this'.**

**Much activity is unaffected by researcher presence – eg large meetings, phone calls**



## *Research tools: observation - challenges*

Exhaustion

The travel...

The concentration...

The new places, new faces and in-jokes

*The heroine in Nice Work felt 'confused, battered, exhausted by the sense-impressions' (Lodge, 1989:120)*

## *Observation – and finally*

Saying goodbye to your subjects – prepare to shed tears! Keep in touch

Advice to observation researchers: ‘Behave like a gentleman, keep off the women, take quinine daily and play it by ear...and stay sober enough to write up your field notes the next day’

(Meek, V.L. 1987, ‘The coalface revisited’ in Macpherson, R.J.S. *Ways and Meanings of Research in Educational Administration*, University of New England, Armidale, Australia)