

6 Methodology

Having clarified key terms and assumptions in the methodology of this project in *Doing Ethnography* II, I will now briefly outline the different methods employed during my research process, such as participant observation, interviews, and focus groups. As I have argued, it does not make sense to have one set of methods to explore the so-called “offline” lives of people, and a completely different set of methods to investigate the so-called “online” lives of people, since people “live everything at once”(Miller 28).

The term ethnography has come to describe various disciplinary purposes: that of knowledge production, that of genre and way of expression, and that of theory-generator (cf. Knecht, ‘Nach Writing Culture’; cf. Knecht, ‘ethnographische Praxis’; cf. Boellstorff et al. 15). Today, the discipline’s core aim is to gain an emic understanding of contemporary everyday concepts of practices, discourse, knowledge, and assemblage (cf. Knecht, ‘ethnographische Praxis’ 5). This is mostly achieved through multi-perspective, multi-methodological access based on active and observing participation in the everyday lives of research subjects (cf. Schmidt-Lauber, ‘Feldforschung’ 219). In the course of the discipline’s history, the conditions, practices, and conventions of ethnography have changed substantially (cf. Knecht, ‘ethnographische Praxis’ 3).

6.1 Participant Observation

Participant observation is typically identified as the key method of ethnographic fieldwork, and is commonly defined as “a total immersion in search of a holistic understanding” (Howell 16), meaning the direct participation and engagement of the researcher in everyday life within a specific research field and an empathetic and comprehending understanding combined with analytical distance (cf. Schmidt-Lauber, ‘Feldforschung’ 220). Schmidt-Lauber herself points out that because of the inherent ambivalence between closeness and distance in partici-

pant observation, it is a fundamentally contradictory approach and behaviour. On the one hand, the ethnographer focusing on closeness would sooner or later “go native” and herself become part of her research field (cf. Schmidt-Lauber, ‘Feldforschung’ 231); while on the other hand, somebody stressing distance would presumably never notice or witness crucial details (cf. Hauser-Schäublin 42).

In my opinion, this view is too binary and neglects the manifold nuances that are so characteristic of ethnographic fieldwork. There appears to be “no other form of scholarly enquiry in which relationships of intimacy and familiarity between researcher and subject are envisioned as a fundamental medium of investigation rather than as an extraneous by-product or even an impediment” (Amit 2). Or as Tim Ingold argues,

there is really no contradiction between participation and observation; indeed, you simply cannot have one without the other. The great mistake is to confuse observation with objectification. To observe is not, in itself, to objectify. It is to notice what people are saying and doing, to watch and listen, and to respond in your own practice. That is to say, observation is a way of participating attentively, and it is for this reason a way of learning. (23)

I agree with Ingold, and see non-participant observation, which has become a recent trend (cf. Lamnek), as something of an oxymoron. Whether in face-to-face research situations or in online research situations, one cannot observe without participating. It could be argued that a structurally different “non-participant observation” – that is, lurking – is possible in online settings. However, on closer inspection, even lurking essentially becomes participant observation. Many early works on virtual ethnography (cf. Kozinets, *Netnography*; cf. Wellman and Haythornthwaite) depict lurking as a convenient method for the ethnographer to gain an overview of her prospective research field without visibly effecting it. Heike Mónica Greschke notes that “[w]ithout ever leaving her desk, she [the researcher] must only start her web browser, and then she is suddenly off exploring strange worlds ‘out there.’ Numerous public discussion forums, e-mailing lists, personal homepages, weblogs, MUDs, chats, etc. open up views of the beautiful new world of cyberspace” (40). Already, one becomes aware that turning on the computer, opening the Internet browser, typing an URL into the bar, logging in and then strolling through forums, agendas and discussions is not, in any case, non-participant behaviour.

Moreover, lurking could only ever be regarded as the starting point for an ethnographic analysis: its boundaries of interaction and for communication are too restrictive, and the data the researcher could extract from such research too limited. Greschke argues that

If one adopts lurking as a research practice, one should be aware that one takes only one possible position within a complex system of communications. Ethnographers who only adopt the role of the lurker may easily get access and a great deal of – even ‘naturally occurring’ – data (Silverman, 2007) at a low cost. What they see and what they are able to understand, however, remain as limited as nineteenth-century armchair ethnography. (43)

Further, in its etymological sense, lurking does not appear a fitting term for a research method. The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* describes the verb “to lurk” first and foremost as “to wait somewhere secretly, especially because you are going to do something bad or illegal” (sec.1). Although another definition of the verb, “to read a discussion in a chat room, etc. on the Internet, without taking part in it yourself” has been added (sec.3), the term essentially never lost its dubious connotation. As such, even seasoned scholars of the field had to acknowledge the term’s limited suitability in describing a research method (cf. Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet* 57).

6.2 Interviews

Hammersley and Atkinson argue that “[i]nterviews in ethnographic research range from spontaneous informal conversations in the course of other activities to formally arranged meetings in bounded settings out of earshot of other people” (108). This open definition of interviews is likely not one that everybody would agree on. Nevertheless, I refer to it here as it does foster the understanding that “[w]hatever their form, interviews must be viewed as *social events* in which the interviewer [...] is a *participant observer*” (120; my highlights). In a practical and refreshing manner, Hammersley and Atkinson counter the chimera of individually and separately applicable methods often depicted in methodological textbooks. In doing so, they refute the idea that the researcher can simply apply one method in one situation and another in another situation, and that those methods would not overlap or inform each other in any way.

To my mind, a cultural anthropologist who can conduct an interview without being a participant observer seriously lacks a unique and fundamental quality of our disciplinary community, “the anthropologist’s antennas” (Howell 17). Invited into a research participant’s home for an interview, it is the cultural anthropologist’s work to notice his taste in interior design, food and drink preferences, family structures, or communication patterns with other members of the household. Meeting up in a public café for an interview, the cultural anthropologist cannot help but notice the smell and sounds of coffee brewing, the cacophony it contributes to, combined with background music and the sound of other guests chatting,