

## **Beyond the Impartial Observer: Academics and Practitioners Discuss ‘Involved Observational Research’**

The film [Kitchen Stories](#) portrays what many people think about observational research. In the film, the researcher tries to find out how kitchens should be designed and to do so he sits on a high chair and observes and takes notes of the object of his research, a single man in his kitchen. The researcher is as neutral, scientific and invisible as possible and is not allowed to talk to the researched. However the inevitable happens and the researcher develops a friendship with the researched.

An Economic and Social Research Council funded seminar, organized by the [Lehman Brothers Centre for Women in Business](#), shows that ethnographic research, full of observations and interviews, has moved away from such clinical assumptions. The seminar, which took place at London Business School on 5 June 2008, is part of an [ESRC seminar series on emotions and embodiment](#), and was the third seminar in the series, organised by Dr [Elisabeth Kelan](#). The seminar was entitled ‘Gender, Power, Embodiment in Research’.

The seminar brought together academics and practitioners with an interest in ethnographic research. The rationale for which was to explore the differences and similarities in approach and to learn from one another.

The keynote speakers were Professor Catherine Cassell (Manchester Business School) who talked about how interviewees and interviewers co-construct one another and Professor Mats Alvesson (University of Lund) who addressed the issue of reflexive methodology and taking multiple perspectives to the material generated in research.

Dr. JK Tina Basi. Director of [Mehfil Enterprise](#) and freelance researcher with [Intel’s Digital Health Group in Ireland](#), discussed the role of identity in shaping the research process and outcomes. Her talk, entitled, ‘Identity at Work and Play: Conducting Ethnography for Commercial Enterprise’, looked at the way in which research design could better include and make space for the co-construction of both the researcher and the research participants’ identities. Drawing upon a range of feminist academics (Haraway, 1991; Stanley and Wise, 1993; and Wolf, 1996), Dr. Basi pointed towards the feminist epistemological critique of positivism and ‘value free’ research, which argues that the subjective/objective dichotomy is false, and that objectivity is simply a name given to male subjectivity.

“Interviewing is the art of construction rather than excavation; thus the task is to organize the asking and listening so as to create the best conditions for constructing meaningful knowledge (Mason, 2002). Research cannot be ‘hygienic’, and knowledge is best created as a co-production between the interviewer and interviewee (Collins, 2000), as two intersecting dialogues: dialogue number one is the ethnographer’s interviews with informants or the observations of people’s lives; dialogue two is between the ethnographer’s written work and the readers (Smith, 2002: 20) or the clients. Such an approach paves the way for greater reflexivity, which isn’t just about presenting the self and being reflexive about the self, it is about exposing power relations and the way in which these relations shape knowledge - a much more authentic way to conduct research, yielding sharper insights and deeper meanings.”

Dr Basi presented two examples from Intel's research in the healthcare sector to show the strength of a dialogic approach to data collection. Intel's research work on transport and mobility in rural Ireland was designed in part by the Rural Transport Programme and the research on social care services in England was heavily influenced by the experiences of elderly people using the services provided by Age Concern.

“Ethnography is just as much about the interview as it is about the setting, it is about building a rapport, yet you do more than just talking. You see things that people cannot articulate, what they don't know they are trying to articulate. Ethnographic research provides a view of the rituals, practices, markers, and triggers in intimate settings and important environments – the situatedness of ethnography however, calls upon the researcher to become vulnerable in the process too.”

Belinda Parmar, a Planning Director of Saatchi & Saatchi and author of Lady Geek <http://ladygeek.org.uk>, presented two case studies where Xploring, a Saatchi research tool, was used to discover insights that overturned stereotypes long upheld by traditional research techniques.

“I apply theories and methods of ethnography to the corporate realm. I take a unique participant-observation approach where I immerse myself in people's lives to discover meaning about real people's lives in the real world on their terms. I develop relationships based on mutual trust and move from an 'outsider' looking in, to an 'insider' uncovering truths about human behaviour and gender differences. I am concerned with the wider aspects of people's lives and their eco-systems”

***The results: practical and actionable insights that have developed into award winning ideas for clients.***

***The product: stories, films, books that tell the stories in rich and colourful detail to stimulate brand ideas.***

Overall, the seminar has shown how to take research into a real life context and depart from the view that the researcher is an impartial researcher by exploring this question from an academic and practitioner side.