

Title:

“Tricks of the trade” – The art and method of combining interviews and participating observations to generate data on drug users participating in rehabilitation programs

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Abstract

In this paper, I aim to explore some aspects of qualitative methods applied within sociology and their applicability, more specifically looking at, and reflecting on: *What* is interviewing and participating observations and *how* can they be valuable instruments to generate data? Here, the paper will address different perspectives and traditions of interviewing and observation and show what rewards and benefits that lies within combining such methods. In addition, I will discuss the methodical implications on the forms of interviewing (open-ended interviews) and observation (participatory) that I have chosen in my Ph.D. project focusing on drug users. Imbedded in this ambition, the paper will address the challenges I can expect from of adopting an ethnographic design, and look at how using interviews and participatory observation will affect the generation of data when entering the field to conduct fieldwork.

In the context of framing my project as an ethnographic study, I will look to distinguished scholars within the field, notably Atkinson, Hammersley, Silverman and others, when discussing the different methodological issues of using such an approach and the methods implied. Finally, this paper is inspired by, and written in conjunction with, a PhD course in Sociology: *Qualitative Researching*, held by the Faculty of Social Science at Nord University, in the period of November 27th – 29th 2017 (module one) and January 23rd – 24th 2018 (module two).

Keywords: Ethnography, Qualitative researching, Qualitative methodology, Thick descriptions, Fieldwork, Interviewing, Participant observations, Participation framework, Drug rehabilitation

1 Introduction

1.0 Ph.D. Project and Paper Research Question

In this course paper, the aim is to explore the intrinsic mechanisms behind two qualitative instruments, open-ended interviews and participating observations, and discuss how they are applicable in the fieldwork I intend to carry out following rehabilitation programs where young drug users cope with drug abuse. The choice of focusing on drug users in this paper links back to the thematic framework in my doctoral project in sociology, studying drug users and their experiences with rehabilitation in an rural town in Northern Norway. The thesis 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*”.

The Ph.D. project will be a qualitative study, observing changes, formation of new networks and recovery from drug use, as drug users participate in rehabilitation programs carried out by local humanitarian organizations. 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?*

Based on the project’s ethnographic design, I intend to write up the thesis as a monography, my reason being that a monographic approach might give me the freedom to thoroughly immerse myself in the everyday lives and troubles of the drug users, and provide me with the space needed to discuss my findings at length. I aim to follow the drug users closely using participating observations and biographical open-ended interviews, and reading documents (Schoon,Sacker & Bartley, 2003; Biernacki, 1986; Hser,Longshore & Anglin, 2007; McIntosh & McKeganey, 2000).

It is important to note that with this doctoral study I am 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, participatory observations, interviews and documents will provide rich data that along with an analysis can result in producing thick descriptions on the informants. Another aspect worth mentioning is that the study will have an inductive approach, meaning that the outlined research questions may change as the project develops.

The following discussion in this paper will be delimited to possible challenges and implications that may present itself during the process of using open-ended interviews and participant observation and to what types of data I expect to generate by using such methods. A brief bullet point overview of how I intend to collect data can therefore be fruitful:

- Recruit ten to fifteen young drug users (age 18 – 35) from a specific drug rehabilitation program and follow them as they participate in a rehabilitation program.

- Carry out descriptive interviews with the local staff of the humanitarian organisation, about the rehabilitation programs history, visions and status.
- Participate in, and observe one-to-one sessions between the drug users and mentors (hired and paid experts within different fields like photography, painting, sports, climbing and other activities).
- Observe the drug user's participation in group-based activities carried out by the local humanitarian organisation.
- Observe the drug users interaction with each other and with the humanitarian organisation in informal situations such as in meet-up points, cafes, workshops art/photography exhibits.
- Interview the drug users about their past and present lives using a biographical interviewing approach.
- Arrange for possible sessions of group interviews (focus groups) where the drug users can talk about their daily lives and way to recovery with each other, and myself acting more as a facilitator.

The bullet points are not in any fixed or particular order, as undertaking such an ethnographic inquiry, where immersion is a key element, one cannot be certain what awaits before one has actually spent some time in the field (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Gobo, 2008). Following the outlines of this project, two overarching research questions are formulated to guide this paper onwards:

- 1) *What is an interview and what is participating observations? What types of data is it possible to produce when applying these methods in a qualitative ethnographic study on drug users?*
- 2) *What are the limitations and what are the benefits of combining participating observations and interviews when addressing the problems that drug users face during the process of rehabilitation?*

2 Theoretical perspectives, Methodology and Concepts

2.0 The Ethnographic approach

The questions we ask about our social world and how we go about answering them depend on our disciplinary orientation. This paper focuses on the discipline of sociology and I want to bring attention to two of its “core” qualitative methods: interviewing and participant observation. A general orientation on how a discipline investigates social phenomenon is linked to its methodology. While in turn, its methods reflect the more specific research techniques which is used to study a given research subject (Silverman, 2011; Silverman, 2013). As Silverman states, the choice between different research methods and approaches taken, should depend upon what you are trying to find out. From a qualitative research point-of-view, the strength of qualitative research is that it can use naturally occurring data to uncover the sequences (“the how”), in which participant’s meanings (“the what”) are deployed (Silverman, 2011:17).

Here, Silverman stresses the concept of “contextual sensitivity”, meaning how qualitative researchers can look at how an apparently stable social phenomenon, like the family, an organisation, tribes or sub-cultures, is actually put together and described by its participants (Silverman, 2011). In sociology, anthropology, and most of the other social sciences, qualitative methods such as interviewing and participant observations are often identified with ethnographic studies. Both of these methods aim to uncover the meaning and significance of social phenomena or subjects in various research settings (Marvasti, 2003). However, making a study ethnographic does not only mean employing two qualitative methods and then claiming it to be ethnographic. Eberle and Maeder observes this:

“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).

Reading Eberle and Maeders description on what characterizes an ethnographic study; I recalled what a course leader said to us, in a Ph.D. course in observation-methodology at the University of Oslo. She asked us to look to each other and ask ourselves, if we, in our research projects had to be away, got sick, or could not go to carry out fieldwork. If we despite being unable to go still could send someone else to do our fieldwork for us, then likely, our project was *not* an ethnographic one. This relates to the point made by Eberle and Maeders. Ethnography means ‘hands on’, and that the research employs all of his

or hers senses, and even though some would argue that it could symbolise a ‘weakness’ (others not being able to reproduce your exact findings), it is still a way of uncovering the complexities of our social world through rigorous and meticulous method of data collection.

Within sociology, classical studies, like Goffman’s *Asylums* (the lifeworld of inmates and mental patients) and Becker (*Outsiders*), have made important contributions, with their work having impact across several social scientific disciplines (Goffman, 1961; Goffman, 1968; Becker, 1963). A key goal in the writings of these researchers have been the close focus on the individual being studied, that their lives and their worlds must be understood “through the subject’s eyes”. In other words, that the emphasis is linked to immersion and empirical intimacy (Truzzi, 1974) Therefore, embarking on my own Ph.D. project, with an ambition to do ethnographic fieldwork is certainly not without its clear challenges and methodological issues, as I too aim to present the drug users perspective on an individual level.

Here Atkinson serves as inspiration; describing how ethnographic is *the* way to conduct first-hand field research: “It provides uniquely privileged opportunities to enter into and share the everyday lives of other people. It provides us with the challenge of transforming that social world into texts and other forms of representations that analyse and reconstruct those distinctive lives and actions” (Atkinson, 2014:3). An important note is that in this paper I will not stress what ethnography *is*, or elaborate on the many methodological implications of choosing such a method, but it is important to be aware of the discussion and debate between studies being merely ‘qualitative’ or ethnographic in nature. Again, Atkinson provides key insight, as he observes some fundamental distinctions found in ethnographic research:

“It is a profoundly ethical form of enterprise, based as it is on a commitment to other people’s everyday lives. It does not seek to manipulate for ‘scientific’ ends. It is a deeply humane undertaking, precisely because it is predicated on the ethnographer’s personal commitment, and the common humanity shared by the researcher and the researched. It is also a profoundly social form of research, in that the researcher is committed to sharing the everyday life of the people with whom she or he does the fieldwork” (Atkinson, 2014:5).

Atkinson’s observations are important on a number of levels for my project commitment, which I will touch upon in this paper when discussing the benefits and limitations of using interviews and observations in the context of doing ethnographic fieldwork. Especially his point of not manipulating or provoking situations, but rather, striving to (in my case) study the drug users and what they do in naturally occurring situations and settings, and share with them, as well as extracting information, which is a vital methodical challenge, and important for the generation of data for later analysis.

2.1 Qualitative Methods Part I: The Open-Ended Interview

For this paper, I will concern myself with the traditions of interviewing that is most common within qualitative research, and emitting from the traditions of interpretive and interactionist sociology (Denzin, 1989; Geertz, 1973; Atkinson & Housley, 2003). The formats being the ‘unstructured’ or ‘open-ended’ style of interviewing. In this paper, I am interested in exploring how the data is produced during interviewing, which in my case is found in the dialog between me and the drug users. My point being, that with the format of interviewing I am adopting, the data are not ‘fixed’ or ‘finished products’, waiting to be extracted before the interview. The challenge lies in establishing a good dialog, and through this dialog, one is able to generate data. To give an understanding of the skills required for this form of interviewing, I use Noaks and Wincups (2004) sketch on its characteristics. The adopted sketch is taken from table 6.1 provided in Silverman (Silverman, 2011:162):

Table 6.1 Typology of interviewing strategies

Type of interview	Required skills
Open-ended interview	Flexibility; rapport with the interviewee; active listening

Adopted from Noaks and Wincup (Noaks & Wincup, 2004:80).

With the required skills listed, an important dimension is how the data is actually produced and extracted during interviewing. Here Goffman’s notion of ‘participation framework’, which is a means of analysing the various interactional roles played by different people in a group in a particular place or given situation (like in the dialog between interviewer and interviewee) serves as a useful concept. For this framework to be used, one has to accept that when someone contributes to a spoken encounter, there is not simply a speaker and hearer, but a ‘circle’ in which each individual holds a particular participation status (Goffman, 1981).

As I intend to carry out my interviews through face-to-face interaction, this way of conducting the interviews could have an impact on which roles that might apply to me as an interviewer and the subjects (the drug users) that I am interviewing. In addition, the interaction in the interview in itself (and the rapport one is able to establish) will have direct consequences for what types of data I am able to access. Pointing back to the interactionist perspective, viewing the session in itself as a place of transaction, where roles are established through the dialog and information that is produced then and there (Atkinson & Coffey, 2003).

2.2 Qualitative Methods Part II: Participating Observations

Like interviews, observations can provide valuable insight in the everyday lives and situations encountered by the individuals one wishes to study. But observations is also something we all depend upon, and as Gobo has suggested, observation is part of the very fabric of the society in which we live – an ‘observation society’ (Gobo, 2008). Naturally, the status of social science observations versus what we observe in everyday life is a big and important issue. This paper does not provide enough room to elaborate more on the issue, but following Silverman, a common solution is to say that social scientist do something *more* or extra with their observations – they write ethnographies (Silverman, 2011:114). Delamont expands on this simple definition, explaining the differences:

“Participant observation, ethnography and fieldwork are all used interchangeably... they can all mean spending long periods watching people, coupled with talking to them about what they are doing, thinking and saying, designed to see how they understand their world” (Delamont, 2004:218).

Delamont’s elaboration raises the question of observation studies being participatory in nature. In a sense, *all* social research is a form of participant observation, since, as Atkinson and Hammersley states, we cannot study the social world without taking part in it (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Generally thought, one speaks of observations as participatory if the researcher, in one way or another, is *interacting* with the subjects in the field, or non-participatory if she or he observes from a distance, or even, not being present at all, like in some cases involving video recording (Cooper, Lewis & Urquhart, 2004; Spradley, 2016b). In my project, the aim is to conduct observations, which in form are participatory. As expanded upon by Delamont, the reason for using this form is to get a sense of their daily lives by frequenting the places where the drug users spend time and hang out. In addition, using this style of observation means one can establish a form presence in the drug user’s community, necessary for building and gaining trust.

3 Discussion

3.0 The Qualitative Challenges and Implications of Open-Ended Interviews

Noaks and Wincups definition is useful when highlight the skills needed for a certain strategy of interviewing. However, it can also be safe to say that such interviews usually takes place through face-to-face interaction with the subjects one intend to study. My point being that one has to take into consideration that conducting such an interview (perhaps, especially, with people from marginalised groups like inmates, prisoners, and people on the run) few things are permanent or stable. The

interview in itself takes on an act of its own, where the participatory framework (and the data that is collected) grows out from the actual conversation and dialog taking place between interviewer and interviewee (Goffman, 1981; Goffman, 2015). In other words, that the data is constructed through the actual interview situation with all the challenges it could imply. A small illustration: when I was doing interviews with inmates in prison, guards wanting something from my informant could interrupt us, frequently, derailing our conversation.

Likewise, the inmates themselves could suddenly ask unintended questions, even personal ones directed towards me, which had to be answered for the nature of keeping up the good rapport (if I had chosen not to answer, the inmate might take offence, which again could interrupt the flow and possibly hinder the data collection). In addition, naturally occurring 'small-talk' is often usual before one commences the 'actual' interview (like turning the tape-recorded on), in some of these cases we found out we could be both training martial art sports and this new information (established then and there) could make the inmate view my role as interviewer/researcher differently than before this information was given. On the other hand, one inmate said he was a father to small baby (like myself at that point) and this established a mutual reference between us (our role of both being fathers). My point being, that it is hard to just push 'play' and expect to extract 'finished products' of information when interviewing. Through the participation framework that Goffman advocated, the interview and the dialog that is established, the surroundings and chain of events all have something to say for the data that is constructed, especially when one is aiming for face-to-face interactions (Goffman, 1981).

In my project, I specifically wish to include questions on their past, present and plans for the future, a style of interviewing labelled as a biographical interview approach (Nilsen & Brannen, 2014; Zinn, 2005). A reason for incorporating such an approach is the ambition to elicit life histories from the drug users. As other qualitative empirical studies on drug users have shown, drug users present situation of addictiveness or troubles is often linked with past problems and history (Pedersen, 1998; Boys, Marsden & Strang, 2001). Therefore, their backstories can provide me with valuable insight, saying something about how they ended up in their current situation and what they now hope to achieve by participating in rehabilitation programs.

Here, the level of rapport I am able to establish will be a key factor when it comes to extracting the information and getting the drug users talking. If I find that they are vague in their recollection of the past, or if they are having trouble remembering, which can be the case for people living strained or troubled lives, then probing may definitely be needed to try to help them 'dig deeper' in their accounts. Likewise, if I sense that my informants are sitting on interesting information, but might be scared of the consequences of revealing too much, being flexible and inviting might help to project a sense of relaxedness, making them more at ease and willing to share.

Further, as my intention is to obtain 'rich data' which hopefully will bring thick descriptions on the informants, a 'biographic style' of interviewing can be one way of achieving this goal (Geertz, 1973). In line with Noaks and Wincup, the keynote to this goal is 'active listening', in which I as the interviewer allows the drug users the freedom to talk and ascribe meanings, while at the same time bearing in mind the broader aims of the project (Noaks & Wincup, 2004:80). In my project, this points back to the drug users being in a 'process of rehabilitation' and the aim of studying if integration back to a more 'normal' and drug-free life is possible.

Being an active listener, knowing when to probe also, and act supporting might also have other more unintentional consequences. In my case, the drug users might think that my commitment means I will speak for them, helping them communicate with local government organisations, legal problems or other personal matters, a sort of 'attorney' acting on their behalf. Taking such a stance is something researchers getting involved with marginalised groups have done before, and can be related to the research goal of 'giving voice' to groups that is not usually able to speak out for themselves, like drug users, inmates in prison, people with dementia, subcultures or others (Ragin & Amoroso, 2010:46).

In my opinion, it is important to communicate in a clear way what is one's intentions and role when going into the study. As I do not aim to become a sort of 'attorney' in the eyes of the drug users, I have been careful to formulate letters of participation in a way that clearly defines my role as an observer. My hope is that the drug users still would want to participate in the project, as it gives them a unique opportunity to share their experiences. However, I do want to point to the issue of *projection*, and the 'how am I seen' when interacting with informants. Claiming 'too much neutrality' or projecting a clear 'distance' when interviewing carries the possibility that the research subject thinking that 'I'm not really interested', or that I care about their stories or troubles, and they might not share details that could make up the 'thick descriptions' I'm after. In such a case, I would argue that projecting one's self as the 'curious student' interested in learning more about the informants practices, experiences and ways of doing things, might be fruitful in the context of extracting thick descriptions during interviews (Spradley, 2016a).

3.1 The Qualitative Challenges and Implications of Participant Observations

As Atkinson point to, there has been attempts to define varieties of participant observation, or to try to distinguish between different degrees of participating, from complete participant to complete observer (Atkinson, 2014:39). In the context of doing practical fieldwork, I agree with Atkinson that such distinctions can be problematic. The reason being that the level of intensity and intimacy with the subjects in a given situation will be equally variable, making it hard to uphold one 'form' of participating observation. Having not done fieldwork yet, I expect to discuss this question more extensively when I spend some time in the field. However, a reflection on the nature of participatory observation, and how

“closely” I will be a participant, is an important question in my project, related to the forms of data I can generate. Especially, since I am aiming to study the social problems drug users are facing in their everyday lives, and investigate how they cope with drug abuse through rehabilitation and intervention programs (with mentors helping and teaching drug users to master skills in activities like photography, kayaking, climbing or other hobbies). It is a challenging, complex endeavour, not to be taken lightly. As Atkinson states:

*“Participant observation is certainly not about gaining a series of impressions about a given social situation. One does not advocate a complex sense of participation and observation merely in the interest of a vaguely rich sense of a social setting, or a group of actors. Our task as ethnographers is not to be the equivalent of a diarist or newspaper columnist, providing personal reflections on equally personal experiences. Ours is an **analytical** attention”* (Atkinson, 2014:40).

With Atkinson’s reflection in mind, my attention, when it comes to making observation of drug users, is to portray the routines, conventions, and codes that furnish the forms of actions that simultaneously enable and constrain the drug users in their social activities. As Bryman (1988) suggest in his list on principle characteristics of qualitative research: ‘Description: attending to mundane detail’ is of particular importance (Bryman, 1988:61). Translating ‘mundane detail’ is to say that an ethnographer attempts to answer the question of ‘what is going on here?’ However, as both Atkinson and Silverman points to, trying to answer what is going on should be based on what people actually *do*, as focusing on how people ‘see’ things or ‘feel’ can quickly degenerate into commonsensical terms or end up taking an psychologistic perspective (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Silverman, 2011).

As Silverman explains, this means paying attention to the most mundane activities in people’s everyday lives, and here, trying to make the ‘ordinary’ activities ‘extraordinary’. In my project, I will observe the drug users in different settings and one of my aims is to seek out and describing the regularities in the drug users lives. This can relate to observing where they usually meet and interact (like in cafes or workshops) during the day, and discover what they talk about while they are there. It can also relate to paying attention to details in the specific rehabilitation program they follow. How often do they meet with mentors in these programs, what activities do they do and what skills do they learn? Understanding how participating in the rehabilitation program might help them cope with the drug abuse also implies trying to follow and observe them on new arenas they might be introduced to.

Like a drug user, learning skills in photography (with a mentor), might suddenly get an invitation to join a photo club which could open for the possibility to get to know new people and new environments. Alternatively, the mentor could introduce a drug user playing football to a local football team where they could meet and interact with new people. Throughout the process of observing, it is important to be aware of the technology one is using to generate data. In my project, the use of fieldnotes will be important, but they can never be a perfectly transparent reconstruction of all that happens in the field on

any given occasion. As Atkinson states, the ethnographer needs to be guided by his or hers developing analytic perspectives. In a sense, the fieldnotes I write on accounts of the observations I make are not ‘data’ per se, they are in themselves preliminary reconstructions of the social world I encounter, which in turn needs to be fed into further translations and reconstructions through analysis, before finally becoming a part of the ethnographic monography I intend to write (Atkinson, 2014:41).

3.2 Limitations and Benefits in the Generation of Data: Combining Interviews and Participating observations

In many ways, one could say that observations and interviewing are two methods with the ability to complement each other. Through interviewing, we can rescue events that would otherwise be lost and interviews can act as a window into people’s past, where we might learn of significant events of great importance to the person being interviewed (Weiss, 1999:2). Still, some will argue that only relying on interviews gives an too ‘artificial’ and constructed situation, were the interviewer have too much control and ability to influence the answers and data that comes out of the session. However, researchers (depending on the phenomena being studied) sometimes compliment interviews with observations, as it provides the opportunity to generate more naturally occurring data from the informants (Delamont, 2004; Spradley, 2016b).

In my own project, a reason for wanting to include both methods is the overarching goal of obtaining thick descriptions on my key informants, possibly generating rich data. My point being, that using the combination of interviewing and observations extensively can become a valuable aid in the process of trying to understand the full and complex range of situations that the drug users experience in their daily lives. However, I want to be clear that I am aware of the ‘dangers’ of treating them as possibly ‘complimentary’: Interviews should *not* be treated as a potential proxy for direct observations or act as ‘supplements’ in their own right, or the other way around (Atkinson & Coffey, 2003:420). Elaborating on this statement, Atkinson and Coffey point to the notion of triangulation, meaning treating the nature of social reality as unduly unproblematic and one should not assume that the investigations of the social worlds always is transparent. In other words, as Atkinson and Coffey claims: “the research methods we use imply or depend on particular kinds of transactions and engagements with the world” (Atkinson & Coffey, 2003:421). Therefore, during fieldwork, interacting with the drug users, I will pay careful attention and respect to the methods I am using in their own right, and be aware of how they construct data differently in the field.

Still, one could argue that it is possible to obtain the data needed from just using one of the modes of the qualitative tools available, but one of the strengths of ethnographic fieldwork is the fact that it is not tied down to any one method of research or one form of data. In my project I intend to extract

details from the drug users lifecourse, both from their past and present situation (with interviews), in addition to spending time with them as they take part in the rehabilitation program and other activities (using participatory observation), focusing on employing these methods complementary to each other and try to play at their strengths.

As Atkinson stresses, much of qualitative research has become too dependent on one data-type (Atkinson, 2014:38). The danger being that many studies are based on single-method designs, and single forms of data generation. Sometimes studies are based only on interviews with key informants (or groups of informants), or too much reliance is placed on recorded talk. At the same time, in the repertoire of research methods, visual materials might be given a privileged or special place. Atkinson points out that in themselves, each of these data-collection strategies contains value (Atkinson, 2014:38). However, at the same time, they do not make 'ethnographic sense' in mutual isolation. He makes an important argument, returning to what he refers to as 'the essence of ethnographic fieldwork', implying that we need to be faithful to the complexities of everyday life. If one ends up reducing the social world to a single dimension, by the use of single modes of data collection, one is running the risk of missing vital and important parts concerning the data that is being generated.

In addition Atkinson mentions that ethnographic research is always potentially multi-method (which also can imply incorporating a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods), but that the crucial difference falls between multiple methods and multiple modes. Here, Atkinson returns to a 'core' theme of ethnographic fieldwork, which may serve as an important reason on the benefits of combining methods to generate data, stating that the social world is enacted and represented through multiple forms and multiple cultural codes (Atkinson, 2014:38). Embedded in this observation is the fact that social organisation is realised in complex ways, which depends on multiple forms, principles, norms and conventions. The orderliness, Atkinson goes on to say, is made possible with symbolic means, with material artefacts, with the use of linguistic skills, through spatial and temporal frames of reference. Moreover, to do them justice, one has to conduct a proper form of ethnographic work, able to capture those important modalities of social and cultural organisation.

4 Conclusions

In this paper the focus have been on presenting my Ph.D. project in the context of discussing the two overarching research questions concerned with the methods I wish to employ going into fieldwork. The first question addressed what interviewing and participating observations *is*, and the second question discusses how these methods, in combination, can be applicable in my Ph.D. project, and further what limitations, values and benefits choosing these methods might have when generating data on drug users. From the discussion I have made, it is clear to me that ethnographic fieldwork depends on a variety of skills that mirror the various forms of everyday live. In this sense, my aim of including both interviews and observations to produce thick descriptions seems to be a good match. Even though one could argue that I would end up with data that could become ‘too descriptive’, such detailed data is valuable when one undertakes an ethnographic approach. However, as Atkinson argues, it is our *analytical attention* that helps lift the details from our material, make them come to life, and become knowledge-based components about the social world (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In addition, I have illustrated Goffmans notions on the concept of participant framework, in the interest of discussing different roles I might expect to establish during interviews, but such roles can also assert themselves during the course of observations, depending on the different situations one encounters.

An old saying is that ‘the road becomes as you go’, something that could be true in my case. As I write this paper, not having done the actual fieldwork yet, I still find it rewarding to discuss the possible outcomes and implications of interviewing and observation before I enter the field. As Atkinson says, ethnography is a process of exploration, discovery and creativity. However, it is easy to get overwhelmed or feel intimidated by the demands of theory. This is why writing this paper now is of particular usefulness. It makes me aware, and reflexive, to the sensitivities surrounding, which are good acts of ‘self-reference’ when it comes to the journey I am about to embark on.

While looking forward, it is important to add that I have tried to stay true to my commitment focusing on fieldwork in this paper, resulting in that the historical traditions, sociological paradigms and the many theoretical issues (meaning the theoretical derived nature of ethnographic analysis and the main contemporary theoretical approaches) have not been elaborated upon here. However, this has more to do with the choice of topic for the course paper, and not discussing them is not the same as not being aware of their importance. As we have seen throughout the paper, ethnographic research demands multiple skills and any project wanting to adopt such an approach should have a clearly defined research problem (or problems), adapt a theoretical orientation, have a rigorous method to record, and analyse the data being generated, and be dedicated to a thorough and time-consuming endeavour (Silverman, 2011:119).

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