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# Methods and Approaches for the Study of Theology and Religious Studies

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*Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau*  
*Transforming Education; Transforming Lives*



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# Reading

Judith Bell, *Doing Your Research Project*  
(Buckingham: Open University Press, 5<sup>th</sup>  
edition, 2010).

# Today

- Interview techniques
- Often put under the heading “Ethnographic Research”

# Part 1: What is ethnographic Research?

- “the study of people in naturally occurring settings or ‘fields’ by methods of data collection which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally.” (Brewer 2006: 6, quoted from Bell 2010: 14)

# „You can't take the subway to the field!“ (Joanne Passaro)

- Traditionally ethnographic research was restricted to small communities (see photos)
- Anthropologists who wanted to do research in urban environments had problems (e.g. getting funding)
- Urban studies research requires special methods

# Ethnographic research ..... in a big city

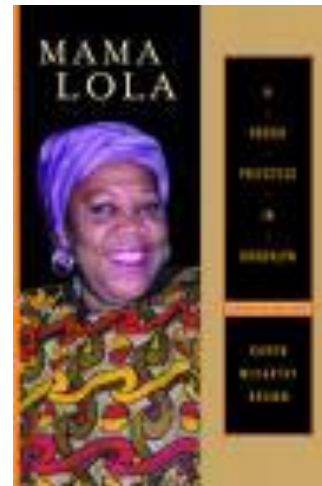
- Ethnographic approach
  - usually in a small environment
- Living together with the community for a certain amount of time
  - -> sharing daily work with them
- New York City
- One of the largest metropolis
  - Brooklyn alone is bigger than most cities in the UK
- Members of the communities are spread around the city -> impossible to share daily life with them

# Adaptation of ethnographic research method

- Making contact to the communities  
— -> **approval** to conduct research
- *Participant observation* of ceremonies
- *Interviewing* members of communities (leaders as well as ordinary members) as well as people connected to the communities

# Multi-sited approach

- *multiply located*  
(James Clifford)
- Example: Karen  
McCarthy Brown's  
study about Mama  
Lola



# Ethnographical methods is...

- “Participant observation, interview, mapping and charting, interaction analysis, study of historical records and current public documents, the use of demographic data, etc. But ethnography centers on the participant observation of a society or culture through a complete cycle of events that regularly occur as that society interacts with its environment.” (Lutz 1986: 108, quoted from Bell 2010: 14-15)

# Part 2: Interviews

- Different types of Interviews:
  - Structured or semi-structured interview
    - List of items you want to discuss with some prompts to remind you about particular issues you want to cover
  - Unstructured or focused interview
    - Conversations around a topic with no checklist but a framework by selecting topics

# Other types: Group interviews and Focus groups

- “Groups have to be carefully balanced in relation to the age, sex and ethnic status of respondents: for example, if young people, women, or people in ethnic minority groups are in disproportionately fewer numbers in the group they may feel socially constrained and not contribute freely to the discussion. It may sometimes be necessary to have single sex groups in similar age ranges in order for the atmosphere to be permissive and relaxed.” (Hayes 2000: 395, quoted from Bell 2010: 166)

# What could be potential questions?

- **Important:** no leading, presumptive or offensive questions
- Start with establishing a relationship between you and the interviewee
- Prepare questions carefully but allow variations

# Interview context

- Venue of interviews (office, street, church ....)
- Invisible responses (tone of voice, facial expression, hesitations and so on)
- Selection of interviewee
- Recording / note taking

# Be careful ....

- “interviewers are human beings and not machines, and their manner may have an effect on respondents” (Selktiez et al. (1962: 583, quoted from Bell 2005: 169)
- -> Ninian Smart’s methodological agnosticism

# Task

1. Select a research topic
2. Write down 10-15 questions for a survey  
(-> quantitative survey, to be handed out to many people)
3. Write down five questions for an interview
4. Discuss the strength and weaknesses of survey vs. interview

# Further Reading

- Day, Abby. 'Researching belief without asking religious questions'. *Fieldwork in Religion*, 4 no 1 (2009), pp. 86-104.