

Tailoring Ethnography

(Co-)Present cognition in public realm research

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Public realm ethnography (Jones, 2021) is an approach developed for studies that take the setting of the public realm – and its socio-spatial qualities – as the “focus rather than the locus” (Hannerz, 1980, p.3) of research. The approach was developed in relation to two key features of public life as conceptualised by Amin (2008), namely ‘situated multiplicity’ and co-presence with strangers (left photo). It was also developed in response to a recurrent observation in public space research that public spaces are often characterised by an absence of social activities in which the public can participate (right photo).

Critically, these qualities undermine the utility of ‘participant observation’ for public realm research: first, because of the multiplicity and fluidity of activities to participate in (and of co-presence of others to participate in activities with), and second, because, at other times, of the complete absence of activities to participate in and of others to interact with.

In light of these limitations, I specify an alternative data collection method: *(co-)present cognition*. Herein, data are collected through emphases on physical (co-)presence in the field (rather than on participation in social groups or activities), on multisensorial cognition, and on reflexivity.

Procedurally, ‘(co-)present cognition’ involves overlapping fieldwork tasks. First, having developed a (often exploratory and provisional) research question, the researcher immerses themselves in a public realm setting – spending long periods there (sampling for different time periods) to familiarise themselves with it. The researcher then collects direct observational data (in fieldnotes and/or using audio-visual recording equipment) in a sequential and iterative way, shifting from, i) more systematised observations of (predetermined sectors of) the setting, to ii) more focused and immersive observations of particular social phenomena of interest.



The impracticality of participant observation for ethnographic studies of public realm settings: (i) ‘situated multiplicity’ and co-presence with strangers on London’s South Bank (left-hand image) and (ii) social inactivity on London’s South Bank (right-hand image). (Photographs by the author).

Throughout, ‘(co-)present cognition’ involves being attentive to non-visual sensory aspects of the setting. It is also characterised by an emphasis on reflexivity; being attentive (in your fieldnotes) to your own uses of, participation in, and responses to the setting and its constituent public life.

References

Amin A. (2008). Collective culture and urban public space. *City* 12(1), 5-24.

Hannerz U. (1980). *Exploring the City: Inquiries Toward an Urban Anthropology*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Jones, A. (2021). Public realm ethnography: (Non-)participation, co-presence and the challenge of situated multiplicity. *Urban Studies* 58(2), 425-440.

Assignment

1
Guided by the questions below, spend time in a public realm setting of interest, taking care to visit it at different times of the day and to think about its spatial qualities and how these mediate and/or are mediated by the social uses of the setting.

- What is the role of different sorts of borders/boundaries in the setting?
- How are borders/boundaries of various kinds signified to users of public space, and for what perceptible purposes?

2
Use fieldnotes to collect your data, but think about the different sorts of multi-sensory and other data (e.g. digital and visual traces/artefacts) you can collect to help you answer the questions above.

3
Start your fieldwork by collecting systematised observations from a fixed vantage point – systematically observe where people congregate, what they do, their patterns of movement etc. – to get a broad sense of a range of socio-spatial border phenomena.

4
Then move to more exploratory and directed observations of specific border/boundary phenomena revealed in step (2). For example, the way a particular

social practice creates temporary borders. This phase of (co)-present cognition is often mobile, perambulatory, and immersive.

5
Ensure that your fieldnotes are both descriptive (what you see and sense) and reflexive (how you respond to what you see and sense).

6
Return iteratively to the set questions, using them to guide your fieldwork practice.

7
Write up a 2-3 page provisional account of what you found out, linking your findings to excerpts from your fieldnotes.

8
As you write up your account, you may want to consider the following:

- How were you able to account for your own experience of the field in your fieldnotes?
- If you were to employ (co-) present cognition more fully, what sorts of sensorial data might you collect and analyse (and how)?