Utilising ethnography and participant observation in festival and event research

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the issues surrounding the use of ethnography and participant observation in event studies. It considers the role and benefits of participant observation in terms of understanding event audiences and provides examples of the range of participant motivations and preferences such approaches can reveal and explore. As a methodological paper it focuses on the processes, challenges and benefits surrounding the utilisation of ethnographic methods within events research, with specific examples taken from an ethnographic study into contemporary dance music culture to contextualise the discussion.

Design/methodology/approach – Ethnography and participant observation are flexible research approaches characterised by varying levels of participation in and observation of different cultural groups and activities. This paper focuses specifically on participant observation revolving around field trips, focus groups, internet research and key informant interviews.

Findings – The challenges facing ethnographic researchers studying event audiences include identifying opportunities for observation and participation, identity negotiation for different research settings, their positioning on the participant observer spectrum, recruiting participants, recording data and the extent to which research takes an overt or covert approach, bearing in mind ethics and participant reactivity. It concludes that once these challenges are addressed, this multifaceted approach provides a valuable avenue for researchers exploring the range of socio-cultural forces at play surrounding event audiences and their experiences.

Originality/value – It advocates a shift from attempts to quantify audience motivations and experiences, to methods which seek to understand them more fully through focusing on the entirety of the event experience and the influence of surrounding cultural networks and discourses.

Keywords Festivals, Ethnography, Events, Dance culture, Participant observation, Rave

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Events are fundamentally social constructions, situated within international, national, regional, organisational and tribal cultures and subcultures. They play a central role in the functioning of societies and the myriad groups that comprise them (Bowdin *et al.*, 2011). Many are steeped in rituals, ceremonies and symbolism which are highly significant and vested with meaning for those possessing the cultural knowledge and versed in the discourses associated with such groupings (Getz, 2012; Jaimangal-Jones, 2012). Events are unique in their ability to transform spaces into liminal zones, with their own unique norms, values and performance etiquette (Jaimangal-Jones, 2010). Each event comes with a set of expectations defined by the symbolic interactions (Blumer, 1969) of its audience and the prevailing discourses surrounding it, which are fundamental to the construction and consumption of event experiences. All this entails that to understand the symbolic nature and significance of events and event audiences one must make extended efforts to learn about the culture from which events emerge and the socio-cultural groups who support them (Holloway *et al.*, 2010).

Whilst anthropological and ethnographic research techniques have been applied to ethnic cultural events (Cavalcanti, 2001; Feifan Xie, 2003) this paper considers how we can apply ethnographic research approaches to more contemporary events. It seeks to contribute to the recent work of others in this area such as Holloway *et al.* (2010), Jaimangal-Jones (2010) and Jaimangal-Jones *et al.* (2010) who have demonstrated the value of ethnographic research in revealing the rich and complex meanings and motivations linked to event experiences, commonly excluded by positivist approaches. This paper discusses how methods such as in-depth interviews, combined with participant observation, focus groups and online research enable the researcher to investigate individuals' perceptions and attitudes, and to construct a representation of the worlds in which they exist and interact, beyond the scope of quantitative research paradigms. It argues that the multitude of variables shaping societies and their inhabitants, are oversimplified by positivist approaches, which fail to account for the array of socio-cultural forces applicable to and acting upon event participants, which cannot be incorporated into the rigid structure of positivist epistemology and its resulting methodological approaches (Crotty, 1998; Storey, 2001; Saukko, 2003; Seale, 2004). Proponents of ethnography including Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), argue that if we are to truly understand cultural groups and the activities they engage in we must learn from them, by studying their behaviour and questioning the significance and meaning behind their actions and words. This paper seeks to contribute to the debate surrounding the role and value of ethnography within the context of events research by exploring and discussing the issues surrounding the practical implementation of ethnographic methods within the context of an ethnographic investigation into contemporary dance music culture. The purpose of the study on which the following discussion is based was to explore participant motivations for participation in dance music culture, their preferences in terms of events and the range of factors which attracted people to specific events. What surprised the author was the range of issues raised by the participants and the individuality of responses and motivational forces, which would never have emerged if a ridged framework such as a questionnaire or structured interview had been applied. The exploratory nature of the research process, the depth of engagement with participants in addition to the space and autonomy attributed to participants' voices enabled to solicitation of a far wider range of information than initially conceived possible.

Whilst the study outlined above threw up a

wide range of information, detailed discussion of this is beyond the scope of this specific paper, which chooses to focus on the practicalities of operationalising ethnographic events research, whilst using examples from the above study to demonstrate practical application. Thus although the paper is structured in terms of literature review, methodology and results and discussion the lines are inevitably blurred in places as the literature considers issues surrounding ethnography, participant observation, key informant interviews and focus groups. The methodology then details the specifics of case study in question i.e. the duration of the study, the range of events attended, participants involved and so forth. The results and discussion section then explores and discusses how the various ethnographic methods (differing levels of participation and observation, in-depth interviews, focus groups and internet research) were operationalised in the context of the dance music study and provides a brief insight into some of the findings of this study. Essentially this papers primary contribution is exploring and discussing the range of issues applicable to those considering engaging in ethnographic research, through considering theoretical and practical dimensions of its application in the

context of a contemporary case study. In doing so it raises and addresses a range of important practical and theoretical considerations for those embarking on such research projects, whilst also providing a glimpse of the range of insights achievable. Key questions for the ethnographic researcher addressed here include where to situate themselves on the participant/observer spectrum? Where to observe participants in event and other settings? How does the participant observer record observational data? How to present themselves to the research participants in terms of being overt or covert in their approach? What are the ethical considerations for researchers adopting ethnographic approaches? Minimising participant reactivity in research settings and recruiting participants for event audience studies all require careful consideration. The exploratory nature of ethnographic research, in addition to the fact that much of it takes place in event settings presents both challenges and opportunities for researchers which will be addressed over the following sections of this paper.

Literature review – introducing ethnographic research methods and approaches

As a method-based paper the focus here is not to review the existing literature on event studies incorporating ethnography, but to discuss the considerations for researchers wishing to engage with ethnographic research (see Holloway *et al.*, 2010 for a comprehensive review of event-related studies incorporating ethnography to date). To understand people's perception of reality, how they see things and what they consider to be important in life are some of the core objectives of ethnography (Spradley, 1980). Although there is no rigid structure or defined procedure for conducting ethnographic research; the main methods associated with it are fieldwork and participant observation – a series of information gathering techniques consisting of different levels of participation in and observation of cultures (Ervin, 2000). Thus the researcher must engage in various levels of cultural participation and become active within the culture (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), observing, interacting, recording and reflecting on their encounters and experiences. In terms of events the impact of culture is immense for it affects both perceptions and interpretations of events and shapes the conventions of behaviour around and within given event spaces (Aitchison *et al.*, 2000; Jackson, 2004; Getz, 2012). The knowledge individuals possess and the knowledge networks they draw from are also highly significant to their understanding of and interaction with events both within and outside their culture (Thornton, 1995). Evaluating the rituals engaged in and how participants negotiate legitimate identities within specific cultural spaces is also possible through ethnographic approaches where the complex nature of participant realities and event spaces can be revealed.

The process of ethnographic research entails a number of methods. The primary ones being participant observation (a number of different activities and levels of participation including some of the following methods); key informant interviews; focus groups and other group interviewing techniques; analysing cultural objects; analysing

discourse; analysing conversation and analysing literary texts; analysing rituals and proxemics (Ervin, 2000; Seale, 2004). The research project this paper focuses on used participant observation in the form of multiple field trips, key informant interviews, a focus group and online research. Through utilisation of a mixed approach ethnographic research benefits from the merits associated with such methods, whilst minimising the impact of their associated weaknesses (Ritchie and Goeldner, 1994; Edmunds, 1999; Ervin, 2000; Mann and Stewart, 2000; Seale, 2004). The combination of methods, flexibility surrounding their implementation and their

exploratory nature, also allows for continual reflection on the data collected, thus shaping the research process through raising further lines of enquiry, whilst also providing the opportunity for triangulation via different methods and approaches.

Participant observation

Participant observation is the most commonly cited format for ethnographic research, described as "an omnibus strategy [y] that contains a variety of information gathering techniques that involve various forms of observation – from unobtrusive ones to full-scale participation" (Ervin, 2000, p. 142). The ultimate purpose of participant observation is not to simply report on a culture, but as Jones (1996, p. 45) describes, observations should be used to "arrive at some hypothesis about the social and behavioural processes operating in the setting you observe". Therefore participant observation should lead to insights concerning the behaviour, motivations, attitudes and perceptions of people within the culture in question. Motivations for participation and for attending particular events are key dimensions where participant observation can add to our understanding of events, however, engagement in participant observation entails some complex considerations.

Spradley (1980) considers there to be six major differences between the ordinary participant and the participant observer. These are "dual purpose", "explicit awareness", "wide angle lens", "the insider/outsider experience", "introspection" and "record keeping". Dual purpose signifies how the participant observer approaches events with the two purposes, to participate and to observe (Ervin, 2000). Consequently participant observation requires the researcher to note the elements of each setting, as well as interacting within it. This entails watching and recording all the events, interactions and participants within the situation as well as the setting itself (Fetterman, 1998). Explicit awareness, linked to dual purpose, refers to the array of information and stimuli in the environment around us that we normally block out. In comparison the participant observer " seeks to become explicitly aware of things usually blocked out to avoid overload" (Spradley, 1980, p. 55). They have to explicitly observe and consider everything, raising their awareness of the details and interactions that occur within given situations. Wide angle lens again refers to the need to increase the scope of attention in research settings. Whereas people generally perceive a small amount of information regarding a situation, related to their purpose for being there, the participant observer must absorb as broad a range of information as possible, aiming to reveal the tactic elements of the

situation by looking at the sights, sounds,

atmosphere, proxemics, people's reactions to certain events and behaviour and so on (Alasuutari, 1998). Nothing can be classed as trivial to the ethnographic researcher, which differentiates them from the ordinary participant whose presence is motivated by some purpose or goal, on which they selectively assimilate information. Everything must be considered in the process of participant observation; to enable the most accurate understanding of the situations encountered (Robson, 2002). The insider/ outsider experience is also a defining element of participant observation; a normal participant is an insider, a part of the situation, thus the meaning of the event is ascertained through active engagement. However, the participant observer has to be both within and outside the events under observation (Robson, 2002). As an insider they will encounter many of the emotions experienced by ordinary participants and as an outsider they have to be aware of their own behaviour, attitudes and emotions and those of the others in the setting. Of course it is difficult to be both all the time and the researcher is likely to experience greater and lesser degrees of both during their

research, fluctuating between degrees of observation and participation (Walsh, 1998). Introspection is a part of the insider/outsider experience, which, although an element of everyday life, generally occurs during or after dramatic, unexpected or traumatic experiences or events (Spradley, 1980). However, as a participant observer the researcher must be far more introspective than they normally would be, situations and experiences taken for granted require analysis to reveal the emotions and attitudes arising from them and the cultural forces at play (Bochner and Ellis, 2002). Record keeping is an important consideration for the participant observer who should maintain detailed notes of observations and " subjective feelings" (Spradley, 1980, p. 58). Making field notes of event spaces, actions and interactions observed, conversations had and emotions encountered are essential to participant observation.

Levels of participant observation

As alluded to earlier there are various levels of participant observation primarily distinguished between overt and covert, whilst a range of other classifications exist including the "complete participant", "complete observer", "participant as observer", "observer as participant" and "marginal native" (Walsh, 1998; Robson, 2002). The complete participant and the complete observer are at opposite ends of the observation/participation spectrum, both have weaknesses in their ability to generate and record meaningful and reliable data. The complete participant necessitates a covert approach, which whilst raising ethical questions regarding informed consent and deception, also places constraints upon the researcher as it limits the scope of their interactions with participants (Robson, 2002). Walsh (1998) and Robson (2002) also consider the necessity to perform a role and comply with others expectations of this role restricts the potential for questioning participants when acting as a complete participant. It can, however, be argued that being a " complete participant " does not necessarily entail a covert approach or deception of others, for example where the researcher is already a participant in the culture in question. This concurs with Spradley's (1980) view who considers "complete participation" to be the "highest level of involvement" as this approach is taken when the researcher is studying a situation in which they are already "ordinary participants" (p. 61). However, this situation is not without its problems either as some circumstances may create problems and tensions in their observation, as it is essential to maintain a wide angle lens and interpret situations fully, which can sometimes be difficult due to levels of social and emotional involvement. The researcher has to maintain a wide angle lens and high levels of introspection to ensure cultural elements taken for granted are not eclipsed from investigations (Davies, 1999).

The complete observer or non-participant has no interaction with the group being studied, observing them at a distance and through the different media that represents, supports and informs them. This type of observation is effective in situations where participation is not possible, but valuable information is still obtainable (Spradley, 1980; Robson, 2002). Another benefit of this approach is that it

eliminates the issue of "reactivity", as those being studied are not aware of it. However, Walsh (1998) comments that this raises the potential for ethnocentrism, if the researcher has no interactions with their subjects then they can potentially misunderstand the meaning and significance of their actions. However, for some researchers this position constitutes a valuable platform to precede more deeper and meaningful engagement. Passive participation is the next level up beyond non-participation. Here the researcher is visible within the research setting but is solely there for the purpose of

observation, having no interaction with those being studied. This can lead to valuable insights into patterns of cultural behaviour and can help the researcher progress to higher levels of participation (Spradley, 1980). Walsh's (1998) definition of "observer as participant" is also similar to what Spradley describes as "moderate participation". This refers to a level where the relationship between participation and observation is skewed in the direction of observation. The researcher is involved to a degree in the activities of those being studied but their participation is limited as their purpose and attention is more focused on observing what is going on, rather than being part of it (Robson, 2002). Fluctuating between being an active and a passive participant also helps overcome issues associated with being too close to the culture by simply stepping back to a more observational position (Bochner and Ellis, 2002).

Participant as observer is also very similar to active participation as Spradley (1980, p. 60) describes it where the participant engages in activities "not merely to gain acceptance but to more fully learn the cultural rules for behaviour". Here the emphasis is placed on participating and "social interaction" to facilitate rapport and gain trust (Walsh, 1998). This level of interaction is where some of the greatest insights can be gained and how the researcher can begin to view things from the perspective of cultural groups. Through active participation in the undertakings of cultural groups the researcher experiences what it is like to be involved in such events. However, Walsh (1998) also raises the danger of subject reactivity with this level of involvement, therefore it requires tact and discretion on behalf of the researcher to minimise their influence.

A further consideration regarding overt and covert observation is the willingness of gatekeepers to allow access to the subjects and to what extent it is necessary to inform them in event contexts? However, there is also the issue of the degree of influence the researcher may have on the subjects if they know they are being researched and what the purpose of the research is. In reality these clearly defined categories become blurred as the researcher may begin at one end of the spectrum then progress through differing levels of observation and participation at different events and even within the same event. As their knowledge grows and they seek to pursue different avenues of investigation within the culture, this will often entail greater or lesser degrees of participation and observation. Davies (1999, p. 72) comments "these four roles are sometimes conceived as if on a scale measuring the degree of acceptance by the people being studied, gradually achieved in the course of long-term fieldwork".

Therefore the degree of observation and par

ticipation may in some circumstances be determined by the subjects and in others by the researcher. However, Rainbow (1977, pp. 79-80) illustrates that the relationship between participation and observation is often neither linear nor logical:

> Observation [y] is the governing term of the pair, since it situates the anthropologist's activities. However much one moves in the direction of participation, it is always the case that one is both an outsider and an observer [y] In the dialect between the poles of observation and participation, participation changes the anthropologist and leads him to new observation.

This statement demonstrates much about the relationship between observation and participation over time. Different points in the research process require varying approaches depending on the knowledge of the researcher and the issues under investigation. However, this statement does not take account of auto-ethnographers. Such people will always be participants, but have to distance themselves to enable comprehensive observation and interpretation of the realities and meanings for participants in that culture. This is to say that we can be aware of the influence of

participation in forming our perceptions of the world and the events that take place within it (Lockford, 2002). As the issue of personal experience will always be present in ethnographic work, the ethnographer must utilise this information, rather than attempt to isolate from it in the misguided pursuit of objectivity.

Key informant interviews and focus groups
Part of participant observation that enables significant insights into cultural behaviour and practices are key informant interviews and focus. Common problems associated with interviews are the subjects can be removed from their ordinary setting and then vulnerable to interviewer influence. However, if appropriate control measures are taken to reduce participant reactivity, then key informant interviews can lead to significant insights. Ethnographic interviews are primarily semi-structured and unstructured, both take a conversational approach, the former where the interviewer steers the interviewee around a range of predefined topics or subject areas, whilst the latter is more exploratory. The semi-structured approach allows participants to elaborate on areas significant to them, whilst enabling the researcher to direct the topics of conversation around the key themes (Mann and Stewart, 2000). One can then probe further into different areas or go off on tangents, depending on the nature of discussion. Unstructured interviews have less of an agenda, being more exploratory and arise in a range of circumstances from opportunistic encounters, for example striking up a conversation with a stranger at an event or simply chatting about an issue with another participant.

Focus groups although often associated with market research in terms of attitudes towards products, advertising messages and so forth are also very effective in ethnographic research (Edmunds, 1999). The nature of focus groups, being composed of people sharing a common interest or experience, can provide a further resource for the researcher, whereby participants are not only prompted and reacting to the interviewers' questions, but also to the comments of other participants (Krueger and Casey, 2000). Participants in a focus group should be "selected because they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic of the focus group" (Krueger and Casey, 2000, p. 4). In terms of recruiting participants into the research process as suggested by Seale (2004) snowballing is a very effective means of recruiting participants in difficult to reach or controversial populations and this was the method used for this research. Due to issues of trust, confidentiality and depth of involvement with research participants, snowballing is an ideal approach to recruiting individuals who are more accepting of the researcher when acting of the basis of personal contacts. There are a number of debates over the optimum size of focus groups, whilst the traditional focus group is composed of eight to ten people, mini focus groups are typically five to six people and maxi-groups ten to 12 people. Mini-groups are thought to benefit through focusing more on the topic and less on "polling the participants" (Edmunds, 1999, p. 19). These enable deeper analysis and investigation of the factors and issues under consideration, by reducing the time taken to

establish consensus of opinion on each area of discussion. A number of benefits are also raised in relation to larger groups in terms of the validity of results and the ability to contextualise findings. Templeton (1994) considers larger groups as beneficial as it broadens the potential differences of opinion, perception and attitude, generating a greater wealth of data, whilst making it easier for the moderator to contextualise the comments of individuals. Edmunds (1999) conversely considers that given the reduced number of participants and the same time frame, smaller groups can generate more useful and productive results as more depth of discussion is possible. Krueger and Casey (2000)

also consider that when dealing with complex topics ten to 12 people is too many and that smaller groups are generally preferable.

Templeton (1994) also raises the issue of anonymity, in that larger groups permit less attention and focus on each individual, therefore facilitating greater openness in responses, as participants feel less self-conscious, due to the number of people and the variety of opinions. However, Krueger and Casey (2000) mention that group dynamics can be effected, when people who want to express their opinions about something do not have the opportunity to do so, this can lead to discontent and certain aspects being missed out, thus compromising the integrity of the results. Ultimately the optimum group size depends on the complexity of the issue being discussed, Edmunds (1999) and Krueger and Casey (2000) note that more complex and technical issues are best discussed between fewer people. In the context of this research a smaller focus group was chosen, further details of which are discussed in the following sections of this paper.

Methodology

The discussion within this paper is based upon an in-depth study into dance music culture designed to explore and analyse the event preferences, attitudes and motivations of participants through auto-ethnographic research methods. The author was already a participant in dance culture prior to engaging in the research, hence the auto-ethnographic approach was a logical one to take. However, as there has been limited application of ethnographic methods within event studies (see Holloway *et al.*, 2010) the research also sought to explore and demonstrate how such methods could be incorporated into this area of academic enquiry. The study took place over a period of six years, with the bulk of the participant observation condensed into a four year period between 2001 and 2005. During this time a range of large scale festival type events and smaller club-based events were attended and data were collected through observation and participation, informal interviews and encounters, key informant interviews and a focus group, in addition to online discussion boards which were also used as a means of gathering additional data. In total participant observation (observation and informal interviews) took place at five festivals, 32 nightclub-based events, 20 parties and 15 after parties. In addition to this ten semi-structured in-depth interviews took place with key informants after several key events as did a focus group.

The diversity of events attended enabled participation in and observation of a range of events which are central to dance music culture and its participants. Through attending the dance music

festivals the biggest and most diverse even

ts, which catered for the whole musical spectrum of dance culture, with all its different genre-based scenes were observed and participated in. These events were primarily attended with small groups of people, who I conversed and interacted with throughout the events, I also attended one festival by myself going through the process as more of an external observer. This process of experiencing events as an individual and part of a group, but always as a participant observer, enabled a great range of insights which will be discussed later. The club events attended tended to cater for more specific niches within the dance music spectrum, so a higher number were necessary to get an insight into different genre-based scenes. Key informant interviews were fundamental to providing the additional depth of discussion within the study as was the focus group. Given the debates surrounding focus group size, a group of five was selected as having greater benefits in terms of providing greater insight into the views of participants and giving each participant more opportunities to contribute to the process. The focus group venue needed to be an accessible and convenient location; additionally a relaxed

and informative atmosphere was necessary to facilitate open responses from participants (Krueger and Casey, 2000). In terms of the focus group and key informant interviews a guide was developed encompassing all the topics to be covered by the discussions to ensure they addressed all the areas considered pertinent to the topic (Edmunds, 1999). This consisted of questions related to participant perceptions and attitudes surrounding dance music experiences including their motivations for attending specific events, their preferences concerning dance music experiences, best, worst and most memorable elements of specific events, feelings and emotions encountered during event experiences (before, during and after), perceptions of different events and event brands, the atmosphere and ambience of different events and their opinions on dance music culture in general.

This study also explored the use of the internet as a research tool in ethnographic research, specifically using chat forums as sites for participant observation. Although this is a relatively unexplored area, they provided an extra opportunity for participant observation within a different sphere of cultural activity. In addition, as the internet is considered as a place where "marginalised social groups [y] can socialise without inhibition", and is central to the development of contemporary subcultures (Mann and Stewart, 2000, p. 20), it was essential to incorporate it into this study. In excess of 150 different threads/discussions on various online dance music message forums were initiated and analysed to feed into the research process. These were primarily used to identify and explore issues pertinent to participants through a thematic approach, which could then be followed up through face to face discussions and as a means of triangulating the research findings arising from observations and informal discussions at events. Utilising this method also enable me to see how participants interacted before and after events, building up anticipation prior to the event and engaging in analysis after.

Although I was already a participant in dance music culture prior to embarking on the research project, due to the fragmentation within dance music culture and the multitude of genre-based scenes, with their own events, venues and prevailing discourses – I was no more than a participant observer in many situations. Such is the size, diversity and complexity of what comes under the umbrella term dance culture that there are numerous club scenes I had no experience of at all and within these could not be classed as a complete participant. Observing these scenes that were unfamiliar then contrasting them with those more familiar, facilitated a more analytical and critical approach to my observations (Davies, 1999). Seeing and experiencing new elements of dance culture also made me reflect on the differences between sub-scenes and how these have emerged. Therefore although I was a participant in dance culture I believe this facilitated engagement in more complex analysis, leading to more insightful findings in the research process. The following section will discuss how the methodology was operationalised and performed utilising specific examples from this study.

Results and discussion

Covert participant

observation – issues and considerations

As previously discussed there is a whole continuum of participant observation, ranging from overt to covert, complete participant to complete observer (Walsh, 1998; Robson, 2002). The initial decision of the researcher is where to position themself upon this observation/participation spectrum. Although there are no set rules observing at an unobtrusive/covert level is often the easiest place to start due to practical issues of access and researcher experience. However, one must carefully consider their

presentation within given research contexts to limit participant reactivity which is associated with the presence of researchers in different social settings (Atkinson *et al.*, 2001). Therefore entering event spaces as a participant observer requires a complex process of identity negotiation and performance to ensure role performance credibility (Goffman, 1969), failure to achieve this will likely result in negative reactivity and the potential to be excluded from the event by gatekeepers depending on the applicable conventions of dress and behaviour (Kaiser, 1990; Thornton, 1995). Through observing dress, etiquette and behavioural norms for particular spaces and participant groups, i.e. through adopting a "complete observer" approach (Robson, 2002), one can learn about participant interactions, which can then enable more natural interactions when they do occur.

In the context of the case study and as a starting point for participant observation a covert approach was initially taken which entailed observing and digesting the entirety of various events from the décor and venue layout, to the behaviour of individuals. This facilitated the adoption of the participant observer mind-set with regards to considerations such as "dual purpose", "explicit awareness", "wide angle lens", "the insider/outsider experience", "introspection" and "record keeping" (Spradley, 1980). Within a nightclub there were several different areas in which behaviour was studied leading to different revelations. The dance floor is the most obvious place to observe constituting the focal point of dance events (Jackson, 2004); however, equally as important are areas like the entry queue, bars, smoking areas, chill out rooms and the halls and stairways where people interact and congregate. Initial observations revealed a number of aspects concerning spatial distances, time and proxemics, for example how during the course of events participants were initially more distanced both physically and socially in terms of the interactions with others, but became closer and more relaxed as events progressed. Social formalities and body language expressed towards others were also noticeably different in the various clubbing environments encountered, whilst some were very open, expressive and welcoming others were significantly less so. This relates to the social construction of different event spaces (Jaimangal-Jones, 2010) where the performance parameters can vary considerably. Dress styles, club and dance floor etiquette and legitimate identity performances also varied from event to event, linked to event and participant enforced dress codes and conventions and wider discourses surrounding particular events and genre-based scenes (Jackson, 2004; Jaimangal-Jones, 2012). Drugs and their corresponding effects were also frequently discussed amongst participants sometimes openly discussing different drugs consumed,

although the actual act of consumption was

generally discrete. Surprisingly within many environments the willingness of participants to approach and procure illegal drugs from complete strangers was fairly common, demonstrating the trust placed in other participants and the liminal properties of these events (Jaimangal-Jones, 2010). The contribution of queuing to the club experience (building up anticipation prior to passing the threshold of the club) also highlights how the event experience begins for participants long before they enter the event itself, with the queue providing a final climax to participant expectations. Observing crowd interactions and density levels within different areas of events were also indicative of atmospheric preferences and positive experience stimulators. For example it was noted how crowds attract further crowds, whilst areas that are less busy become less attractive to others, reflecting the simultaneous production and consumption of events, whereby the audience constitute a key element of the product. Overhearing conversations and engaging with participants also revealed insights into individuals' perceptions concerning dance music and club culture, their motivations for attending and opinions of specific events. These encounters provided a wealth of background information to be explored further

through future conversations and key informant interviews, whilst also enabling comparisons between individual participants, different events and genre-based scenes.

Recording ethnographic data

In addition to the positioning of the researcher on the participant observer spectrum another key consideration for ethnographic research is the recording of data. Lofland (1971, p. 4) states that the collation and recording of ethnographic research "should contain a significant amount of pure description of action, people, activities and the like". Such information leads to a greater understanding of cultural processes and forces at play within different events. When such accounts are recorded, they can be examined in depth at a later date, to generate understanding of the nature of and motivations for the interactions that take place within cultural groups in different settings and circumstances (Walsh, 1998). Lofland (1971) also emphasises the use of direct quotations where possible commenting, "to fully capture the reality of a place [y] the reality of face-to-faceness that permits most fully knowing is the reality of spoken messages and gestures" (p. 4). Such reporting allows the participants to describe and relate to their worlds in their own terms, which is fundamental to successful and reliable accounts of cultures (Bochner and Ellis, 2002). However, in the process of covert participant observation, it is not possible to record conversations and in such instances the most I was able to do was make field notes on the main points/issues raised following events. In terms of in-depth interviews and focus groups recording is essential due to the range and depth of data generated and the entailing analysis required. Note taking is essential for ethnographic research and participant observation (Spradley, 1980); this involves making notes before, during and after field trips. With regards to the study in question to manage this process a research log was maintained with a range of entries for each event. Notes were related to all aspects of the event experience, so pre-event feelings and issues, decision-making process and influences surrounding individual events were recorded. The build up to certain bigger events and the sense of anticipation was reflected upon and deconstructed to analyse the cultural forces and influences at play throughout the process. For example how was the niche media (magazines, radio, etc.) constructing discourses around the events and how were participants using message boards and forums to discuss prevent issues. With the increasing prevalence of social media and web-based interactions surrounding events, these are likely to become increasingly useful in future events research too. Notes of the actual event experiences then followed the lead-up phase; here I noted personal issues for myself, observed behaviours, interactions with others (verbal and non-verbal) and other issues, points and perspectives that appeared pertinent on various occasions. The process of producing a research log provokes immediate reflection on the event experiences encountered and analysis of the multitude of cultural forces at play. The log also provides a record to refer to and reflect upon throughout the research process, which is essential given the timeframe for ethnographic research.

Interactive participant

observation

Where more significant insights can be gained into cultural groups is when researchers engage in overt, interactive participant observation, i.e. when they are not attempting to hide their position as a researcher from those they are observing (Spradley, 1980; Walsh, 1998). Although in the context of events it is impossible to inform all participants of your position as a researcher and you may also be restricted access by gatekeepers, it is possible to inform those engaged with on a personal level. As previously mentioned a key

consideration throughout ethnographic research is participant reactivity, so the researcher must be mindful of their potential to influence participant responses (Spradley, 1980). Care is needed in the terms of participant reactivity so as not to lead participants, also the tone of delivery and body language during interactions must be carefully considered. The researcher must also be mindful of the information provided to participants, depending on the context and formality of the interactions and research setting. The less formal the setting the less detail required, as too much specific information can adversely impact on the spontaneity of the interactions, becoming more of a hindrance than a help in the research process. The most appropriate way to provide information was to reveal more about the research as encounters progressed and became more substantial, so information about the project is disseminated in a more natural, conversational and incremental process. In terms of ethics this also meant that as participants were aware of my positioning as a researcher as encounters became more involved and they divulged more personal data. Also to ensure high ethical standards no individuals were personally identified in the research findings, all were allocated pseudonyms.

A very useful form of participant observation utilised within this research was attending clubs and other dance music events with groups of clubbers who were accessed via a snowballing technique. This technique was chosen because it "relies on personal recommendations by people whom the respondent knows the legitimacy of the researcher may be felt to be assured and it is therefore a useful way to tap into people who are involved in a network that might otherwise be wary of participating in social research" (Bloch, 2004, p. 177). Attending events with groups in this way provided the opportunity for talking to participants before, during and after their event experiences – a number of key informant interviews were also conducted after such trips.

Prior to the events there is the decision to attend, with the potential to explore how cultural forces such as the media, promotional methods and peer groups shape perceptions of events and initiate actions to attend. Here ethnography has great potential to evaluate the influence and effectiveness of marketing and public relations exercises surrounding events, which are notoriously difficult to assess. What was very evident from participant discussions was how influential the media was in generating interest and constructing evocative discourses surrounding the larger events (Jaimangal-Jones, 2012) and the DJs performing at them. Niche magazines and youth radio played a major role in building expectations of significance, spectacle and other

worldly spaces in relation to the larger ev

ents. So much so that for some participants attendance at certain large-scale events was likened to a form of religious pilgrimage, or rite of passage (Van Gennep, 1961), with the emotional and physical journey playing a significant role in the event experience. The influence of peer groups on attendance was also explored, as events are generally attended in social groups, so understanding how groups decide on specific events is of considerable importance. Research revealed how event attendance was often instigated by opinion formers who displayed higher levels of sub-cultural capital (Thornton, 1995) and a higher propensity for niche media consumption. The palpable sense of anticipation building and pre-event preparation in terms of dress and identity negotiation is another interesting part of many event experiences. Here through using frameworks such as the performance metaphor (Goffman, 1969) one can explore the performance parameters of event spaces and the legitimate identity performances permissible within event environments (Jaimangal-Jones *et al.*, 2010). Indeed the distinctive social and physical attributes of many dance music events also emerged as a major appeal, where participants felt free to perform and experiment with alternative identities within the parameters of these liminal spaces.

During the events participant interviews are less formal or structured, focusing on immediate aspects of the surrounding environment. Here the researcher may focus on the best and worst elements for participants, which are easily recalled in the moment, for instance the quality of the experience and emotions encountered. There was often a general sense of being at ease and a notion of belonging within clubbing spaces, even amongst thousands of strangers, which emerged again as a major appeal of certain dance music events with their alternative norms of sociality (Malbon, 1999; Jackson, 2004; Jaimangal-Jones *et al.*, 2010). It also emerged how people watching was an appeal of the larger festival events, due to the eclectic subsections of dance culture represented.

During the post-event conversations and interviews there was also reflection on factors leading to specific event attendances, which also enabled comparisons between expectations and lived experiences and triangulation with pre-event data. Indeed many of the issues highlighted above were often discussed further within the post-event interviews. During reflections on event experiences the atmosphere was also commonly cited, how it differed in various arenas at larger events, the extent to which it was positive and how it compared to other events were frequently discussed. Linked to the atmosphere are the music, the audience and the drugs, with many participants discussing DJ performances which were particularly memorable for their selection of music, performance and audience reception. The composition of the audience was also a frequent point of reference in terms of the level of attendance, the openness and friendliness of other attendees and the range of identity performances witnessed at the larger festival type events. Due to the simultaneous production and consumption of events the audience becomes part of the product and a huge aspect of the experience for attendees as they are all co-creators of the event experience (Getz, 2012). Thus the appeal of many events relates to the size and composition of the audience and their interactions with the whole crowd and its individual members. It is notable that such audience interactions can also take place prior to and following events face to face and via internet message boards and forums, which were also included as part of this ethnographic study.

Internet message boards and forums
After investigating the possibilities and implications of different types of internet research it was decided that using asynchronous communication in the form of internet message boards and chat

forums would be preferable (Mann and Stewart, 2000). The major advantage with message boards was that there are many of them, covering various different scenes and geographical areas and the researcher could initiate discussions on particular topics, contribute to and stimulate other discussions and simply observe discussions. This meant I had varying degrees of influence over topics, although once a topic was initiated it was completely open as to how others wished to contribute and orientate the nature of their contributions.

This again facilitates greater participant control over their views and enables them to respond within

their own perceptual frameworks. The anonymity of message boards (with users having pseudonyms) also contributes to an openness of responses to an extent, particularly in terms of discussing deviant or controversial behaviour and attitudes. However, it was also observed that there were a range of cultural discourses which govern and influence interactions and expression of opinions within such online communities. Therefore even though participants were anonymous, they make visible efforts to carefully construct and maintain the credibility of their online identities and relationships with others in these virtual clubbing communities. The nature of

message boards also means that researchers can initiate a topic or monitor one over an extended period of time, therefore enabling contributions from interested parties over that time frame. In terms of consent, there is the ethical consideration that these individuals were sometimes unaware that a researcher was present, however, when actually initiating debates and posting questions on forums I clearly identified myself as a researcher. Internet message boards were found to be an excellent resource for gaining wider insights into participant perceptions of various aspects of dance culture including different events, venues, DJs and so forth. Often in the lead up to large events there would be a range of discussions surrounding the anticipation of what was to come, likewise there was also a reasonable degree of post-event reflection and analysis. Sometimes discussions related to specific clubs and venues, often placing significant emphasis on the crowd composition and attitudes, in addition to the DJ performances and audio-visual spectacle. In terms of future research, conclusions to be drawn from the use of online message boards and forums are that they provide an excellent avenue for exploring and developing research questions, testing ideas and theories and as a means of triangulation within a wider data set. However, to solely use this method of data collection may lead to restricted findings as the length/depth of participant responses are often briefer than face to face responses in addition the absence of paralinguistic clues makes assessing the sincerity of responses more difficult.

Conclusions and summary
As a developing area of academic enquiry the potential for events research to embrace a wider range of methodological approaches is increasingly being acknowledged and accepted. One such method considered to offer particular insights in terms of audience attitudes and motivations is ethnography. A methodological approach widely used in other areas of academic enquiry, ethnography facilitates insights into and analysis of events and the cultures which surround them through exploring and understanding the cultural worlds of participants and providing a more holistic context to their study. This paper has sought to explore the range of methods within the ethnographic research toolkit and consider their application to the analysis of event audiences and event experiences. Thus its key contribution is to the discussion of how different ethnographic methods can be applied to events and the participants who frequent them. In doing so it poses and answers questions such as what it

means to be a participant observer, where d

oes one begin the process of participant observation and situation oneself on the participation/observation continuum? What does the participant observer need to do and be aware of? How do you engage with participant observation in an event context and how do you go about recording and analysing data? It also considers other pertinent questions regarding the ethics of overt and covert participant observation and the presentation of the researcher within the research setting. In order to contextualise the discussion this paper has drawn upon previous ethnographic research into contemporary dance culture considering the challenges and benefits surrounding the implementation of ethnographic methodologies in practice. Whilst much more could be said about the actual research findings this discussion is based upon, they are beyond the scope of this paper, which is intended to focus on ethnography as a methodology for events research.

At the outset it is important for researchers to fully appreciate what participant observation is and the differences between a participant observer and an "ordinary participant" (Spradley, 1980). This entails a heightened degree of awareness of event settings and participant interactions, observing, noting, reflecting and analysing the

sights and sounds witnessed. It is also the case that the researcher will experience a flux between degrees of participation and observation, i.e. the extent to which they are observing others engaging in the event experience and the extent to which they are actively participating themselves. The reality is that many researchers will begin from a complete observer perspective and this is the point this research advocates, as it enables the researcher to enter the participant observer mind-set and begin collecting data, without directly interacting with participants. Also when entering any research setting participant reactivity must be carefully considered, for example it is probable that you need to fulfil a particular role to gain acceptance within the research setting. If so what should you wear and how should you act? Are you more likely to be more accepted if you wear particular clothes and what are the interactional norms and protocol within given event spaces? Thus there are a range of considerations to ensure the researcher presents themselves as a credible participant and interacts accordingly to convince gate keepers and other participants so as not to adversely affect research findings. Following exposure to the research setting and observation of role performance parameters and conventions, the researcher can then begin to get more involved with the participants through informal and more formal mechanisms such as field trips, online research, key informant interviews and focus groups.

   This paper has emphasised how field trips should be situated at the heart of events- related ethnographic research and ideally events should be attended with groups who the researcher can engage with before, during and after the event itself. Through engagement with participants in the build-up to event experiences researchers can address the decision-making processes and cultural forces at play in motivating attendance such as entertainment line-ups, promotional campaigns, niche media influence, cultural discourses, peer groups and online forums. Such considerations generate a more complete understanding of the event experience, as something that often begins months before the event itself, with a complex set of variables involved. Experiencing events with groups of participants not only helps to build trust with them, leading to depth of engagement, it also enables reflection on the reasons people choose to attend events and comparisons between expectations and reality, identifying the preferred elements of the event experience. In addition when conducting interviews and focus groups the researcher can relate more to the views and comments of participants as they have been through the experience with them. Also by comparing the views of participants to one another and relating back to the researchers own observations and field notes there are countless opportunities for triangulation within ethnographic approaches due to the range of data generated and the flexibility of the research process.

   A central argument for using ethnography is that the multiple methods it entails exposes the ethnographic researcher to a greater breadth of cultural information over a longer period of time, providing a deeper insight into participant motivations, behaviours and experiences. For whilst methods

such as interviews and focus groups form part of ethnographic research, they constitute part of the data gathering process rather than constituting it in its entirety. Ethnography places the researcher at the centre of the event experience, examining both insider and outsider perspectives and in doing so enables the researcher to consider the entirety of the event experience – from pre-event decision making to post-event reflections – from the attendees' perspective. Being non-linear and exploratory in nature there is significant potential for flexibility enabling the researcher to explore the realities of events participants, without a ridged framework and set parameters at the outset, which can restrict research findings.

Here the researcher is able to react and tailor the research process as it progresses, through following up pertinent lines of enquiry.

Whilst there is a precedent of anthropological and ethnographic research techniques being applied to exotic and ethnic cultural events where issues of authenticity and representation have often been foregrounded (Cavalcanti, 2001; Feifan Xie, 2003). This paper demonstrates how ethnographic approaches are also applicable to more contemporary events and the cultures surrounding them as argued by others such as Holloway *et al.* (2010). Whilst there has been a history of seeking to quantify participant motivations and experiences for attending events this paper sets out an alternative framework for investigating audience motivations and behaviours, which encourages the researcher to step into the cultural worlds of the participants they are researching to better understand them. This means not viewing the event experiences in isolation, but also considering the range of other contexts where events are considered and discussed by participants such face to face and online. One must also consider other aspects such as journeys, rights of passage, media discourses, identity performance and the social construction of event spaces as part of the event experience and the appeal of different events. So great is the cultural resonance of many large scale events, that attendance is a right of passage for many young people who are often attracted to events for their social attributes more than physical characteristics. The physical and socio-cultural distance of event spaces from normal places of residence can also lead to heightened experiences for participants, but we must step into the worlds of participants to fully understand these matters.

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