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We all have an *Easy Rider* inside – shadowing technique in students’ lifestyles’ research

Abstract

The text presents an approach which bases on participant observation, but is significantly more intensive and considerably interferes in peoples’ everyday life. The observer becomes a “shadow” of the observed people and accompanies them in everyday activities. This technique was crucial for the research made by the author and concerning students’ lifestyles, commissioned by Sustainable Lifestyle Research Center, carried out by the group of students from the University of Łódź. The text describes goals and results of the project and aims to show briefly the problems and chances of using shadowing tools in anthropological work.

Keywords: lifestyle, sustainable lifestyle, shadowing research, participatory observation, Y generation, infantilist ethos

The question we often have to cope with when we start research is: how to make it adequate? We wonder if short-lasting field research is able to reflect the complexity of what we would call “real life”. We look for methods and techniques best matching our purposes and find most of them not insufficient when used individually. Phil McNaghten and John Urry describe this problem as inadequacy of survey-culture (Mc Naghten, Urry 2005: 107-109). They notice that when we are confined to (even best composed) surveys and interviews we will have to handle with the image which is incomplete because what people say is not necessarily what they do.

That is why it is a good idea to mix traditional ethnographic techniques in order to triangulate data and make them more reliable. We find such mix in shadowing research where participatory observation is integrated with an interview. What is even more important, in this kind of research an investigator accompa-

nies an investigated person in every single activity beginning from getting up, through meals, shopping, work and free time, ending with falling asleep (or at least time just before falling asleep not to violate somebody's privacy too much). Such long-lasting constant contact enables getting used to each other and reduces the need to create a positive impression by the researched.¹ This technique has become quite popular among market researchers since they found it better reflecting public opinion than polls and focus group interviews.² Shadowing is especially useful in research concerning people's lifestyles where investigating single fields of life like sex, work or health would give us only a partial image of a situation. When we want to know how people live, we have to observe them holistically.

Researcher in a shadow – methods of data collecting, analysis and interpretation

That was also first thought that came to our heads when our research team got a commission from Sustainable Lifestyle Research Center. By "team" I mean a group of eleven students³ attending lectures entitled "Anthropology of organization" at the University of Łódź. We were asked by the Center to write a report that would enable them to create sustainable lifestyle projects for students of the University. The main question we were supposed to answer was: How do students live and why do they not live the way they recognize as right for their health? In other words – why do students destroy their health despite the knowledge about correct and incorrect habits taught to them by schools, newspapers, TV and Internet?

During the first meeting with our commissioner we selected together eight fields of interest to be focused on. They were: eating and shopping, stress and stimulants, work, physical activity, hygiene and prevention, sleep, relax and leisure, interpersonal relationships. Later, we also devised several questions about every of these fields that were supposed to be general directives for the observers. We placed them in our research tool – Standardized Observation Card. We needed the Card not only because we wanted to systematize the work but even more because of our investigators. Empirical part of the project was carried out by fifty students of the first year of anthropology. Such a solution enabled us to gain more observations during a short period of time than it would be if we were working in a group of eleven. Actually, thanks to this solution the number of observed

¹ You can try to improve your image in somebody's eyes for two hours but it gets much harder when he or she accompanies you for three days.

² Honestly, would you answer seriously for a question as: "If this washing powder was a person what would he look like?"

³ Tutor of the team was dr. Ewa Jagiełło (University of Łódź), while team itself consisted of: Ewelina Kocemba, Jarosław Koperski, Katarzyna Łuć, Paulina Masiarek, Anna Rajaska, Barbara Śludkowska, Monika Stasiak, Joanna Trojanowska, Marlena Urbańska, Julia Waclawiak, Małgorzata Walaszczyk.

people was even doubled – because of the fact that our investigators were the same age as the investigated, they delivered us another valuable data about themselves.

But before starting to get any data we had to standardize observation. We also had to make a compromise between an amount of time given to us by the Centre and intention to precisely reflect a normal rhythm of students’ life. That is why we chose one week as our basic timeframe. During the first three days students were to be observed by our investigators and the next four days were expected to be self-observation of the investigated. Both parts were published on photo-blogs, however, the first of them took textually-photographical form while the second part was dominated by photos. We decided to use blogs as a tool of record because it gave us the possibility to constantly watch the situation on the field of the research. However, it created also a problem of data’s secrecy because internet blogs are normally open to visitors. In order to protect the privacy of the investigated, we asked observers to close access to the blogs by means of a password that only they, the observed and our research team knew. Moreover, it was suggested not to place a full name of an observed person in the text.

Observation was supposed to describe every single activity of students’ lives from getting up in the morning until going to bed at night. That was also a reason for which students had to be informed about aims and procedure of the research as honestly as possible. Our “shadows” were going to accompany them at the university classes, at work or during family dinners.⁴ In such conditions trying to skip the issue of informing about the aims of the research would not only be unethical but also very unpractical.

After the first day of observation we started to get data. At the beginning, there was not a large amount of information but then we felt a bit avalanched by it. We had no idea how to find any patterns in the flood of data. We started from dividing ourselves into two-person teams in which we tried to reassume some things among particular categories (e.g. “eating and shopping” team was trying to find some general food habits, types of menu and meals’ timetables). This attitude showed to be incorrect very soon because it was impossible to use such quantitative analysis to qualitative shape of research.

Thus, we started to talk. First few meetings we organized were a bit like “intellectual parties with a bit of tittle-tattling”. We were expressing our surprise about the way of life of the observed. We were exchanging comments like: “Remember that girl who doesn’t eat if the food wasn’t been prepared by her mom the day before?” or “How’s that possible they don’t have any obligations and spend all day just sitting in front of their computers or hanging around with their friends?!”. There were more of such doubts and most of them were touching the problem of childish or at least immature behaviours of the investigated. They seemed to be totally free of any responsibilities of adult life and their consumer decisions were similar to those made by children rather than adult people. Since it was rather a common than isolated situation, we started to feel that there was something

⁴ Also in many untypical activities as making small repairs at grandma’s house, wandering about the city at three a.m. during university feasts or hangover treatment the next day.

more in it than just being spontaneous or impulsive. It was like living their life was absolutely unintentional, not deliberate and not thought-out. During discussions we matched this issue with Benjamin Barber's term *kidults* (infantilized adults) used by this American sociologist to describe contemporary consumer society or as he calls it – society “spoiled” by neoliberal market (Barber 2008: 9).

Another interpretative framework we used was sociological term *Y generation*.⁵ As Witold Wrzesień points out, this generation lives “in the decade of a child”. For the parents of *Y generation*, a child occupies central position in the family (Wrzesień 2007: 138). The effect of such treatment is a high level of self-confidence on one hand but also total lack of self-criticism on the other. As being “ever-children”, *Y*'s are strongly focused on their own needs and purposes without considering common good.

As I said, using the above-mentioned categories had *a posteriori* rather than *a priori* character. It was an effect of a discussion over the collected data and comparing them with available social theories instead of trying to match obtained information to previously chosen fixed theoretical frames. Of course, a researcher's mind is never placed in vacuity – our predictions always have an influence on analytic and interpretative procedure. As Klemens Szaniawski writes:

It's true that researcher's decisions as well as decisions in general are motivated by his values. If [those values] just motivate the criteria of choosing the solution, demand of impartiality stays unaffected. Impartiality consists in consistent following previously chosen rules – no matter what preferences about the results of using them we may have (1994: 8).

In reference to the chosen solution but still not in isolation from the collected data, we created several types of personality (or wider – styles of life) that could be found between the investigated (and between ourselves as well because as students we became an element of the research). All of them can be placed at the two opposite ends of bipolar scale. Those ends are marked by two ideal types⁶: *kidult* and *adult*. As both of these terms are rather abstractive than really existing categories, our types of personality can be found somewhere between them and not at any of the ends itself. We distinguished three main types: *Easy Rider*, *Traveller* and *Treasure Hunter*. We created also subtypes which enabled us a more detailed description of shadows and particularities of the researched reality. Subtypes are not fixed – some features make them closer to one type and some closer to another. At some point they may overlap but it does not mean they are the same. During our interpretative job we created such categories but we do not say it is impossible to distinguish more of them or to rearrange them according to particular circumstances of the social scene. It is both strength and weakness of qualitative research that they can deliver us some patterns and trials of understanding re-

⁵ Researchers of the social scene love using the word “generation” every time they discover some new characteristics or behaviours among young people in the same way as journalists like writing about dying celebrities' phrases like: “The Last Great Tambourine Player” or “The Last Master of Painting Red Circles on the Green Background”.

⁶ I use this term according to Max Weber's category of “ideal types” (Weber 1985: 82-93).

searched reality but one does not claim that they will give us knowledge that we would call “certain”. On the other hand, this property makes qualitative research more flexible and, in the effect, also more reliable than data strongly focused on certain and unchangeable categories.

But let’s try to discuss our three main models together with specific examples and how they relate to each other and to typology *kidults-adults* in general.

Just flowing ahead – *Easy Rider*

Easy Rider has become our central model because it was the type very widely occurring between the investigated students and it seemed to be less or more symptomatic for this age group (or maybe consumer society in general?). Additionally, some behaviours typical for it could be found in two other models. Although the name of the category refers to David Hopper’s movie of the same title, our *Easy Riders* have not much in common with his prototype. They do not look for freedom but easiness. They do not rebel because there is nothing to rebel against in a reality where everything is permitted. They are unable to see any social or cultural limits because neoliberal market and consumer society encourage them to go for their desires without considering any consequences. That is why these days *Easy Riders* are concentrated on getting maximal pleasure from their lives which, according to Barber’s categories, means choosing easy before difficult, fast before slow and simple before complex. Immaturity is immanent part of this category and *Easy Riders*’ behaviour brings them closer to being “ever-children” rather than adult people. They do everything to make their life easier.⁷

This category is not only the most numerous but also the least diversified. Patterns of behaviour are amazingly repetitive and, what is interesting, they do not cause any comments from our researchers (they obey the same social rules, they live similar way – very often they are *Easy Riders* themselves so they do not notice something that seems to be normal for them). Small differences occur between people living alone and with their parents but it does not change a general tendency to avoid any resistance in everyday life.

Let’s have a look at several examples. *Easy Riders* rarely pay attention to preparing food. Most often they eat valuable meals only when living with their parents or when somebody cooks for them. This leads to such ridiculous situations as the one described:

G: I’d like to eat a tomato but I don’t feel like slicing it.

D: Poor girl. Do you always choose the easiest solution?

G: Unfortunately, yes – at least unless there is anybody at home who would slice a cucumber or tomato (interview DM2/2012).

⁷ It should not be mistaken for a thoughtful planned activity of resigning from a complexity of life in Western civilisation. *Easy Riders* are not Buddhist monks...

Students do not plan their meals as well. It relates both to time of meals during a one-day period and to their expenses for food in a week or month. When they leave home, they do not take any food with them simply because they do not think in advance that they can get hungry. As a result, they starve away from home and after coming back there they eat as much as possible. Another effect of this lack of imagination is buying unhealthy snacks in vending machines or in fastfood bars. Meal times are irregular, the quality of dishes is less important than price, quickness and easiness of preparing. *Easy Riders* also do not plan shopping which often results in having empty fridges. They also have problems with understanding priorities of their home budget:

M. is waiting for the money [from his parents] to come in on his bank account. After next checking up, he notices the payment. At about 1.30 p.m. we go out and in nearby "Żabka" shop M. buys desired packet of cigarettes and we go to the [...] pizzeria in Łódź" (interview KP2/2012).

Similar lack of anticipations for the future refers also to health and physical activity of *Easy Riders*. They do not feel the need to take care of their organism. Sport is not very popular in this group. Even if physical activity is undertaken, it is mostly related to the exterior and not widely understood wellness. Students expect quick results of their activity so they do not see anything wrong in taking food supplements supporting muscle growth.

They do not think about long-term consequences of their behaviour like over-using alcohol or cigarettes. One moment they cure hangover and make promises not to drink so much any more and a few hours later they make the same mistake. They also do not feel that neglecting their responsibilities because of a hangover to be a problem (and lack of responsibilities beside studies is another matter that should be mentioned here. Cleaning up their rooms is usually maximum of their household chores).

Also relationships of *Easy Riders* with other people tend to be intensive but not very deep and complex. Their relations with parents are often reduced to participating in home dinners or giving pocket money. When it comes to relations with potential partners they talk about "trying out" people and then "looking around" for somebody more attractive. They "consume" other people but they are also "consumed" within the same system of values. They are focused on their private life rather than on civil activity and rarely choose participation in any forms of associations, organizations and institutions (this problem will be described in details further). From marketers' point of view *Easy Riders* are perfect consumers because they are oriented mainly on themselves and their own needs and desires, no matter what health, social or ecological consequences can bring such attitude.

Tasting life – *Traveller*

This model was not very common among the investigated group. However, we distinguished it because of noticeable differences between the manifestations of *Travellers* and those of *Easy Riders*. Those differences are usually connected with more points of reference than in case of *Easy Riders*. *Travellers* may become in touch with people from other cultures (Erasmus students) or their passion implicates untypical patterns of behaviour. Their consumer decisions are not so limited and they try to look for non-standard ways of personal development.

On the other hand, they have also tendency to float on the surface and make impression rather than getting deeper. In case of *Gourmet* (one of our subtypes) this impressive way of life is connected with deliberate construction of self-image and activities, starting from food and ending with preferred forms of entertainment.⁸

Such creation can be detailed and holistic but it does not change the fact that it refers mainly to different types of goods that can be bought and consumed. Also, main purpose of their usage is putting emphasize on uniqueness of an individual and making him or her feel better because being dissimilar to anybody else. Reflection is paid mostly to a kind of purchased goods and not to the fact if buying them is necessary at all.

Also *Tourist* and *Alice in Wonderland* subtypes differ from the central model thanks to the wider spectrum of accessible lifestyles (they may have friends and partners of other nationalities or thanks to travelling they are more cosmopolitan). Unfortunately, they rarely use this advantage as a source of personal development. Instead, they taste their life like a cookie and often go for pleasure forgetting about its external costs. *Alice* can feel she does not fit the glimmering reality around her but seduced by it she cannot resign of its magic. She looks for her way but too often ends in a trap of her own desires and mistakes.

Behind the horizon – *Treasure Hunter*

This model is not only peripheral but, I would say, marginal in comparison with *Easy Rider*. Its representatives are similar to treasures themselves – so rare and unique among a great majority of *Easy Riders*. What differentiates them from their peers? Most of all, it is paying attention to and reflection over experienced reality. In fluent and shapeless postmodernity they are trying not to stay so fluent and formless. Instead, they ask questions and think over what is happening around them. Although they do not look for individualism and uniqueness at all cost, they are much more diversified and individual than invariable group of *Easy*

⁸ One of students subordinates her daily habits to “French” style: she eats croissants and drinks *café au lait*, she loves “Amelia” movie and she makes imprecise plans of working as a waitress in Paris (interview MB/2012).

Riders. Treasure Hunters take care of their self-development and they usually have passions or fields of interest that enable them to fulfill this development. They are not only consumers but consumers who are aware of what they buy and why. They do not just consume their life but live it intentionally. Even when they let the postmodern reality seduce them, they do it more consciously than *Easy Riders* still keeping distance towards themselves and their activities.

When looking for subtypes in this category, we reached not only for collected data but also for our own experiences with the people who can be classified as *Treasure Hunters*. As Kirsten Hastrup notices, a researcher through her field work becomes a part of an experienced world as well as an element of her own narration about this world (Hastrup 2008: 65). Despite being investigators, we became also the investigated – as active part of students' reality. One of the subtypes in this category is *Hobbist*. He follows his interests even if it demands from him a lot of time and effort. *Hobbists* are not discouraged from doing something as soon as *Easy Riders* and their activities often go beyond typical ways of spending free time (e.g. it may be acrobatics or studying exact sciences for pleasure) (interview RW/2012). These people do not treat entertainment just like killing time. They pay attention to the fact that it is also an element of their self-development – intellectual or spiritual. Generally, they avoid easy differentiation between elements of life (work-development, passion-fun etc.). They are able to choose complexity before simplicity and other “adult” before “kidult” categories (like creative difficulty before barren easiness – as it was mentioned in case of developing their interests). The above example is also connected with choosing slow before quick which in turn refers to ability of predicting long-term consequences of their actions.

Thinking of not only individual but also environmental or even global effects of what we do is characteristic of another subtype in this category – *Ecological/Social Activist*. This category did not occur in the investigated group but its lack was so meaningful that we included it into our considerations. One explanation of such a situation is that young people are so focused on their own matters that they do not want to do anything that would go beyond their private life. But Janusz Czapiński shows also another possibility, namely – aversion of *Y generation* to any activity that would make them part of anonymous group of people. *Y's* do not believe in great ideologies and they show interest only in problems concerning directly them or their relatives (Czapiński, Żakowski 2012). They use common sense and defend small matters in opposition to international policy, great institutions and organizations. That is the reason for which contemporary activists treat social, interpersonal factors as an important element of what they do. They remind small tribes of Michel Maffesoli (Maffesoli 2008) in a way in which they act (acting against direct threat to their sense of safety and privacy, e.g. ACTA protests) and with whom they act. They also put an emphasis on enriching aspect of activism. Obtaining new skills, gathering certificates useful in a future career can be a good reason to do something for others as anything else.

The same mechanism of mixing particular and common good, individual and social advantages, private and public spheres can be seen in other two subtypes:

Vegetarian and *Spiritual One*. To put things clear – we do not consider these forms of activity “worse” or “less valuable” than those described before. They are just adapted to the times we live in and still they are illustrations of more complex and intentional attitude towards a reality than it takes place in case of *Easy Riders*.

“Will it be fun”? – student lifestyles’ research and infantilist ethos

As we came back to the model of *Easy Rider*, we should mention once more Barber’s category of *kidults*. Using it in the interpretation of our research is important because it does not limit its results to particularities of students’ life and young age of the investigated but it shows wider cultural context of the observed situation. Students are childish because society they live in encourages them to be so. Their bad habits are good habits from the point of view of marketers. It is profitable for the market that we choose unthoughtful unintentional behaviour before more adult one. If we are to be good consumers we should choose easy before difficult, fast before slow, simple before complex but also fun before work, egoism before altruism, impulse before reflection, private before publish, ignorance before knowledge – as Barber enumerates (Barber 2008: 131).

Most of these characteristics can be collected into one explicit rule of consumer society: better is what is pleasant. We experienced that explicit rule in a surprising way during the preparations to the research. When we were explaining our first-year colleagues procedure of the observation, one girl asked us: “But will it be fun?”. Following the pleasure no matter what the cost will be is characteristic for the contemporary Western society and it is a kind of basis on which infantilist ethos can be built.

On one hand, being an adult in the world focused on producing *kidults* is not easy. Adulthood does not fit the values appreciated in the macdonalized world: quickness, measurability, effectiveness (Ritzer 2003: 14-35). Adulthood is qualitative rather than quantitative and oriented to long-term effects rather than an immediate gain. According to our research, it is very hard to keep healthy food habits when “trash food” is often much easier to get and cheaper. Taking dietary supplements is demanded in many sport disciplines and people who do not do that achieve worse scores than the rest. Getting into deep interpersonal relationships is not preferred by employers who want us to be flexible and independent from such “limitations” as children and family. Our initial question about the reasons of unhealthy lifestyle behaviour among students is the question about living in infantilized culture.

On the other hand, we must believe that not everything is lost. The examples of resistance were found among our fellow-students and they can be found in somewhere else as well. Great campaigns miss their goal when it comes to *Y generation* but a “tribal” construction of groups of reference may be a chance for alternative

models of behaviour. Scepticism towards authorities may be both a plus and minus depending on the way we want to use it.

In our research we were trying to describe dominating models of life among our peers but it showed to be a valuable beginning of the reflection about modern society in general. Next studies should improve methodology and broaden a range of research in order to deliver us an image as precise and detailed as possible. Only then, we will be able to think about any resistance to infantile ethos. For it is beyond all doubts that we cannot limit activity aiming at sustainable lifestyle to purely superficial solutions. Growing up to maturity must go deeper and not only eliminate effects of infantile ethos but reach to its unawared roots and successively cut them.

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