

## Siamack Salari, *Everyday Lives* *Ethnography for the Arts*

### Introduction

Siamack Salari is a champion of commercial and video ethnography around the world. He was resident expert host on Channel Four's *Shop Til You Drop* and the BBC Money Programme's *Shoppers in the Wild*. Before setting up *Everyday Lives* in 2000 he worked at the Henley Centre for Forecasting, at J Walter Thompson advertising agency where he was head of his own small group of ethnographers and at BMP DDB. He is a visiting lecturer at London Business School and Oxford University SAID business school and has lectured as far north as Oslo and far south as Milan. He is an avid YouTuber and has a dream of collecting examples of all human behaviour in a shareable video archive, making the world more lucid.

Siamack demonstrated the value of ethnographic research looking at whether ethnographic research could uncover new insights into the way that consumers interact or engage with the arts and our individual organisations. In preparation for his presentation at the AMA, he undertook a dedicated ethnographical piece of research into a couple of arts attenders which were available for delegates to download from the AMA website.

The session was introduced by **Alec Coles**, Director, Tyne and Wear Museums asking the question 'what role do the arts play in peoples' lives?' This is something which it is easy to answer superficially but much more difficult to answer in an informed and empirical way. There always seems to be a mismatch between the reasons that people give in surveys and the more fundamental motivations for their attendance. Both speakers in the session were looking at innovative ways of approaching this and had interesting perspectives to introduce.

### Ethnography

This presentation was informed by original research into arts attenders. It involved following two people around with a video camera and interviewing them about what they were doing. There wasn't enough time to produce conclusive results but did provide 'tasters' which might be worth further investigation.

Ethnography, as far as *Everyday Lives* is concerned, is about filming and adding meaning to those films. It is about interpreting it in a way that will help you to reframe or see everyday ordinary things in extraordinary new ways. Adding meaning is difficult and it can only happen by actively working with the client. The conflicting ideas and interpretations around what is happening often produce the best results.

Whilst most qualitative research focuses on needs states, ethnography looks at outcomes. It is about interpreting outcomes rather than needs in order to understand drivers.

It's about using the video footage: deconstructing it, breaking it down, speeding it up, slowing it down and is very much a collaborative approach with the client. All sorts of insights can be delivered relatively easily, but getting the client to do something with it is much more difficult.

Typical explorations are

- Animating segments: bringing certain segments to life – providing richness
- Documentary: eg. working with Unilever to explore attitudes to black skin, producing a documentary when it became clear that the underlying recruitment was not going to be rigorous enough.
- Innovations/NPD
- Receptivity: 'talk to me when I'm listening'
- Brand activation: Why is this brand not doing so well? What is changing?

Different categories of research included

- Kraft and vending machines – what is convenience?
- Pedigree pet foods in global rural communities. How can pet food be sold to people who normally give their pets 'raw food'? Observations showed that they didn't understand the difference between human and animal food and ate the canned pet food to see what it tasted like. Very simple observations will tell you that your communications are fundamentally wrong.
- Genera Mills and the cycle of non-purchase

[Siamack outlined this process using an example produced for Procter and Gamble]

The process started with the kick-off meeting which included a 'must-capture' list from the client. To begin with, the subjects were filmed periodically over a couple of days without them knowing why and without being interviewed. This was then followed by a 'question generation workshop' with the client, watching the films and deciding on areas which are worth further investigation. EL then goes back to the people who have been filmed, asking them to comment on their actions and putting the generated questions to them. The final stage involves a debrief and producing a final management summary including action plans illustrated by parts of the film.

### Co-discovery

A film from the USA demonstrated the decision-making process of a couple of people walking through a store and the way they made decisions about what they were buying. The couple were commentating on what it was they were doing, often revealing apparent contradictions in their motivations.



### Receptivity

The pieces of work produced for the AMA were a couple of co-produced films which investigated a variety of attitudes to the arts by two individuals: Danni and Tom. The process started with 'receptivity' – looking at the points, mindsets when people are most receptive to the messages which are being given to them: 'talk to me, but talk to me when I'm listening to you.'

### Influences for Danni

Danni subscribes to *TimeOut*; she uses it to find out what's on and because it's a 'good publication'; however she doesn't read many newspapers, getting it mainly from BBC Radio 4 and the BBC News at Ten.

Danni doesn't read anything about what she's going to see, like a critic or review, because she likes the surprise; she doesn't want to know what other people think or she doesn't want to know the story

Danni is signed up to most of the major arts centres and organisations' mailing lists – out of choice, because it's a good way of finding out what is coming up. She also likes the print brochures with images. Although she uses the web for information, and particularly at the Barbican, print is a preference.

The other influences are recommendations from friends and colleagues, or sometimes she goes out of curiosity. Many of her friends in Brazil and London recommend work, so there is an international flavour. For example she went to see a Philippine dance piece at the Barbican once because it looked interesting and she wanted to know what Philippine dance looked like.

Danni will take limited **risks**, maybe with music – listening in the shop to something she'd never thought of and then buying it. She is aware that experimentation is important: 'I might not like it, but I might also love it, and be really glad I heard it'.

### Influences for Tom

It's about us, not me: it's clear that his partner is a significant influence:

*'The best way to influence me to see something would be to influence my partner and persuade her. Then we would go as a couple - although I have no idea how you would do that. I would definitely come to the theatre more often in that case.'*

Shared occasion: *'when it comes to things we like, my partner Kate is very different, but that's good because we expose each other to each other's lives and it becomes fun'.*

Tom will take **risks** – opinion forming not just about the good – *'sometimes I will go to see something I've not heard about because I trust the name of the company, like Cheek by Jowl'.*

Another layer of communication helps: *'advertising rarely has an effect on me; and flyers don't at the moment – although they used to... I am influenced by friends and reviews to see films, theatre or music'.*

### Music for Tom

- 'Fills up the gaps'
- Transports... fast
- New headspace
- Releases '**minority personalities**'

*'I may not understand it [the music] but it speaks to me, and affects me on the inside. I'm aware that this is how sport affects some people... I get excited by something that attracts me on an emotional level – I think that's the answer.'*

*'... It allows some of the minority personalities within me to come out, so for the time that I'm listening to Helter Skelter by John Lennon, I am that minority personality. Obviously, I do not think that my mother has deserted me and life is endless pain, but for the time that I'm listening to that song, I can believe it. While I am believing it and gelling with that song, I am in that different headspace.'*

*'I feel that music brings me out of myself a bit and exposes me to new ideas, probably slightly more quickly than books do, which for an English teacher is a strange admission.'*

#### Arts activities for Tom

- Minimal advanced planning
- Yet frequent
- Not a 'heavy' decision
- Minimal advanced knowledge so he can form his own views



*'My partner suggested I come and look at these sculptures [in St James' Park]...they're not something I would have looked out for myself, but I'm glad I came... they're fantastic... made out of recycled materials and scattered about the place... this is not something that I would normally go out of my way to see, but Kate [partner] suggested it. We've seen three plays so far this year, which is quite a lot for us... I'd always prefer to go to the theatre than see a film.'*

*'The reason that I don't go out as much as I used to is that life fills up with 'stuff' as you get older: to the point where you can't get anything done. Some of that 'stuff' may be about the washing or laundry, but if you're talking about performance then I probably goes to, or sees something, or does something about once a fortnight... that includes music, film, gigs, seeing friends etc.'*

*'...sports doesn't connect with me, but music, theatre, TV, films do, although I don't fully understand why. I suppose that it's to do with the emotions contained within the art form; because there's an emotional content, I can 'get that'.'*

#### Why use ethnography in the arts?

- The difference between what people say vs. do – this is a very good way of sorting out the truth from the perceptions
- Understanding what nearly happens/doesn't happen
- Unarticulated needs – things people can't express in words, but can be observed through their unselfconscious actions
- Context and reality – how do the arts really fit into people's lives? Again, this was vividly illustrated by the arts attenders' video documentaries