Observational Drift: A Methodological Research Proposal for Community Prospecting in Socio-Educational Services

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Abstract

Purpose: This article aims to describe the process of application of the technique of Observational Drift for prospection in three territories of Catalonia, and to present recommendations for its application in research and socio-educational action with young people.

Design/methodology/approach: Observational Drift is a qualitative research technique that has proven effective as a practice for community prospection. The process of design and application in the pilot implementation of this technique is presented together with a reflection on the outcome.

Findings: The pilot implementation of the technique has made it possible, within the framework of the research project, to identify methodological recommendations such as the edition of an observation manual; the training of the research team; the identification of supporting computer applications and registration questionnaires. Records of youth dynamics have been obtained in the 3 communities studied: the town of Celrà, the western district of the city of Girona and the "Ciutat Vella" district of Barcelona, 3 environments of different sizes located in Catalonia, Spain.

Practical implications: Observational drift is a qualitative technique that shows, with methodological rigour, the observation of relational dynamics together with the relevant facilities and places, presenting a situational reality. The information obtained must be contrasted with other qualitative methodologies to be transferable. It is a methodological technique that requires a large team and a significant amount of work.

Social Implications: This technique provides the opportunity to carry out prospections, and introduce researchers and professionals to specific realities with a critical perspective. We recommend its use in qualitative research and socio-educational care to improve the design of socio-educational youth care programs and policies.

Keywords: Youth, Qualitative research, Empowerment, Socio-educational action, Youth policies.

Introduction

Observational methodology has been consolidated as a scientific method in recent decades, incorporating procedural developments with great rigour (Anguera et al., 2020). This paper presents the experience of applying **Observational Drift** as a research technique within the framework of the *"HEBE-III Project. Empowering youth in the community. Case analysis of three communities"* funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (MICIU). In previous editions of the research, narrative techniques were used (Llena-Berñé et al., 2023) to analyse the factors that facilitate and limit the empowerment of young people from the perspective of social educators. Now in its third edition, the project aims to analyse how the community - understood as a network of facilities, services, entities and as a network of interpersonal support relationships - facilitates youth empowerment. To this end, different qualitative techniques were used to analyse community relations and dynamics; among them the technique of Observational Drift, the subject of this article.

Youth empowerment is currently one of the most prominent challenges in the design of youth policies at three levels: a) the municipal level, through local youth plans; b) the state level, present in most of the national youth plans of European countries; and c) at the European Union level through the EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027); articulated through three core areas of action: engage, connect and empower. Goal 5 (SDG) of the United Nations 2030 Agenda also points to the empowerment of girls and women as one of the challenges to bear in mind. Within the framework of our research, we have defined youth empowerment from the perspective of socio-educational action or accompaniment as being:

> "The process that increases the chances that a person can decide and act consistently on everything that affects their own life, participate in decision-making and intervene in a shared, responsible way in what affects the community of which they are a part. This requires two conditions: that the person acquires and develops a series of personal skills (knowledge, attitudes, aptitudes, abilities) and that the environment facilitates the effective exercise of such skills" (Soler et al., 2017, p. 22)

The community is the set of facilities and services and the interpersonal social networks on which the youth population relies on in going about their daily lives. Therefore, the community has a concrete geographical attribution - the social infrastructure that derives from investment and local policy decisions (Klinenberg, 2021)- and also a high relational content. Within the framework of the HEBE project, we have defined "community" as the awareness of sharing sociocultural elements with a group that identifies as a community, based on 3 indicators: a) sharing social and cultural heritage, b) actively identifying with the civic and associative processes that occur in the community, c) identifying the public space as their own and making use of it (Planas-Lladó and Úcar, 2022). In the first two phases of the HEBE project, the spaces, moments, and processes that influence youth empowerment were explored. First from the perspective of young people and later from the perspective of educators. These findings highlighted key factors that shape how youth engage with their community and have informed the approach used in this article to validate the application of Observational Drift.

Specifically, in the review of the literature on Observational Drift, there are precedents for its use in community, artistic and urban planning projects but not related to socio-educational attention to specific groups. Similarly, its use in research is neither common nor significant. The purpose of this article is to present the validity of the application of Observational Drift as a research and socio-educational action strategy with young people based on the pilot test carried out in the HEBE-III project.

Conceptual approach

Observational Drift. Description and uses.

Observational drift is a research technique for the recognition of urban public space, closely linked to studies that analyse the geographical fabric of a city. It has been used mainly in the fields of architecture and urbanism (González-Cárdenas et al., 2014; Suso, 2014); social psychology (Pellicer et al., 2012); anthropology (Delgado, 1999) and sociocultural animation (Escudero, 2012). We find a basis for Observational Drift in the orbit of situationist thinking that combines art, architecture, philosophy and literature. We understand the situationist movement as "*an interdisciplinary group of artists and intellectuals swirling around the figure of Guy Debord, who have in the vindication of the historical city, in contrast to the bitter criticism of the modern city, one of its main lines of action*" (Loren, 2014, p.123). At the same time,

Observational Drift is a technique used to analyse how people mobilize, live and appropriate public spaces; and how interpersonal relationships occur between neighbours or between individuals who share the same urban physical space. It has also been used to analyse the differences between various spaces - squares, streets - of a city (Suso, 2014), for example, when cities - the result of their expansion in the territory - have historical centres and areas of expansion. Continuing with the contributions of this author, *"Observational Drift is a technique of uninterrupted passage through diverse environments. It proposes a reflection on the ways of seeing and experiencing urban life"* (Suso, 2014, p.236).

Observational Drift is carried out mainly in an urban context, understood as a relational space of coexistence with its own characteristics and forms of relationship and being that becomes observable, from multiple strategies. Pellicer, et al., (2012, p.151) point out that, "*despite the difficulty that being in motion can generate, in terms of data collection mechanisms, this technique offers great flexibility. This implies a variety in the different forms of recording data: visual, audio-visual, textual y multimodal*". In recent years, there has been an increase in interdisciplinary research and research based on the arts (Navarro, 2023). This shows the scientific validity of qualitative research from the first-person account where self-ethnography and the collaborative construction of artistic maps generate knowledge. They are processes of participatory and collaborative reflection aimed at change and social justice. It is worth highlighting the contributions of the iconoclasts and their collective mapping methodologies as a strategy to develop critical socio-political awareness based on pedagogical and artistic strategies (Iconoclasistas, 2022). Risler and Ares (2013) point out the opportunity to build collective stories that show the complexity of the relationships between those who inhabit the territories, avoiding the classic cartographic interpretation oriented to the reproduction of power structures. They are qualitative research strategies that facilitate the participation of all people in a territory.

In Observational Drift the field of study is not limited outside the geographical space, whereas it is in Participant Observation (Pellicer et al., 2013). In its methodological development, the researcher in Observational Drift plays the role of a key informant when walking or moving through the field of study. Later, we will see different manners of wandering or strolling. The application of Observational Drift requires the use of support materials, such as the drawing of maps. The objective is to establish routes of incursion into the urban space to be analyzed, instruments to control the time spent observing during the drift, the number of people who collect the annotations, etc. González-Cárdenas et al. (2014) point out that these preconditions guarantee as objective an observation as possible during the exercise. Chance is admitted only in the uncertainty traced by urban routes, keys to discovering the city. Observational Drift is an exercise in urban ethnography: "*Walking is the great tool of the urban ethnographer*" (Espinosa, 2021, p. 117). The ethnographer is both a participant and an observer (Delgado, 1999), so taking into account the limits of objectivity, carrying out an analysis of the urban space means carrying out an auto-ethnographic exercise, repositioning oneself and observing the relationships of urbanites and of others. Therefore, there are different ways of performing Observational Drift: Deligny's *Erratic Drifts* of meaningless, de-hierarchical wandering that seek new forms and spaces of relationship and being; the psycho-geographical drifts in which walking involves relating meaning to one's own experience; the drifts based on *Floating Observation* placing the experience in the observation of the walking of others as a way of collecting data. Being able to "drift with others" or simply "drift looking at others"; or the "*go along*" methodologies that incorporate the conversations and interviews of the informants on the journey and the gestalt strategies that force one to draw straight lines crossing the space linearly and unwaveringly. Observational Drift can be defined and experienced in multiple forms and with varied contents. What they have in common is that they favour the interpretation of urban realities. Those experiences that enable dialogue between art, the city, and society are particularly relevant, as

they reveal relational dynamics from these contents and multiple experiences of constructing collective thought (Pellicer et al., 2014).

Observational Drift collects the sensory perception of reality in the group, bringing about awareness of the diversity of personal constructions of reality. It involves taking a tour of the city or town, with a route that is not predetermined, it is erratic; taking note of references in an observation script. It requires a previous exercise of defining the guidelines and fields of observation (social life, building, spaces, ecology), designing the registration instruments, specifying the observation script, delimiting the territory, the times and hours of application, and finally, sharing the observations recorded (Escudero, 2012). Finally, Observational Drift is a methodology of scientific observation that allows us to capture reality rigorously and systematically (Montenegro and Pujol, 2008). The researcher does not participate or intervene in the observed events, and so does not modify them in any way. Naturalistic observation is conducted.

Observational Drift in socio-educational care

Social Pedagogy is the science of education that studies socio-educational action. This is understood as being all those educational processes oriented to life in society, to social justice and that promote individual and collective well-being, and the cultural and social development of individuals, groups and communities (Ortega et al., 2013). Social Pedagogy promotes the construction of a more equitable, just and cohesive society, based on the acceptance of diversity, equality and democracy as principles of coexistence (Caride, 2004). In these educational processes in which people relate, have experiences and develop learning, it is pertinent, in some situations and moments, to offer socio-educational accompaniment (Úcar, 2023). Educationally accompanying is to take into account the bodily, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual dimension of each person; attending to it in its entirety from listening, looking and allowing oneself to be transformed. A non-paternalistic humanizing action that makes it easier for people to take charge of their lives, bending their destinies towards a more cohesive coexistence. (Planella, 2008). From this perspective provided by Planella, we understand educational accompaniment based on two basic premises: a) considering the person to be autonomous and capable, and b) having an environment or community context that allows their participation. This combination promotes their empowerment. Therefore, socio-educational care for young people requires a double space for action: complementarity between accompanying people and advocacy in the community environment, which is something that requires dialogue and community strategies. Socio-educational care for young people must take place in the community environment, in those spaces and scenarios in which they develop their lives. The community becomes the macro system in which they relate, where they acquire values, a critical spirit, and participate. It is, therefore, the community that constitutes the primary site in which to carry out socio-educational accompaniment (Avià et al., 2017). Socio-educational care must start from the knowledge of the communitary context in which young people live and develop. It must avoid the adult-centric gaze and be articulated from availability, to accompany while respecting the times, spaces and rhythms of young people (Vila, 2020). Socio-educatively accompanying involves establishing an educational bond that is rooted in listening and dialogue, and one that requires time and presence. It also involves recognizing the autonomy and decision-making capacity of young people by assuming the responsibilities of their decisions. Socio-educationally accompanying also requires influencing the community, to generate opportunities in the context and in the network of socio-educational, health and cultural services that facilitate their participation and offer opportunities for change. Thus, the community becomes in itself an objective.

Socio-educational accompaniment must start from observation, and Observational Drift is a valid technique. It is an opportunity with methodological rigour that facilitates approaching the community from a non-intrusive but systematized perspective. The application of Observational Drift favours the discovery of community dynamics, allowing us to find out how the people relate to each other and circulate in the social community network, what responses they receive, the availability of resources, their dynamics, etc. Observational Drift is an essential starting point for any socio-educational project aimed at socio-educational action. It is particularly indicated in socio-educational projects aimed at children and young people, as well as other groups: the homeless, people with mental disorders, addictions, etc. It can also be of great interest in the application of community development projects or projects promoting social rights. However, observations do not allow the analysis of private spaces and other strategies must be chosen to analyse this context.

Objectives and methodology

The main objective of this article is to describe the process of applying the technique of Observational Drift in three territories of Catalonia within the framework of the HEBE-III research project and to present recommendations for its application in research and socio-educational action with young people. The three territories are:

- **Municipality of Celrà**[2] (5, 652 inhabitants), formed of 3 large sectors: the old quarter (oldest part of the town), the residential estate (newly created residential area) and the industrial estate (which groups most of the companies in Celrà, mainly in sectors such as chemical -especially of pharmaceutical products- and that of metal and textiles). 50% of the population works in the service sector, while 43% work in industry, and 7% in the construction sector. The number of young people of immigrant origin has grown significantly in recent years, representing 45.8% of the young population of Celrà. The population has medical care services and public education is covered up to high school. It also has different programs and services that offer accompaniment, guidance and support to young people.
- **Western district of the city of Girona**[3] (9,610 inhabitants) is one of the neighbourhoods of the municipality of Girona (102,684 inhabitants) where its economy depends heavily on the service sector. This neighbourhood is very close to the centre of Girona, but the Ter River physically separates it from the rest of the city. Although the city generates many opportunities for mobility, tourism, leisure and culture, there is a clear contrast between the city and this neighbourhood in terms of stores, services, use of public spaces by the population, etc. In recent years, the population of foreign origin has increased very little in the neighbourhood, but the situation of vulnerability is especially acute at the intersection between youth and foreign origin.
- **District of Ciutat Vella**[4] (105,829 inhabitants) is one of the ten districts of the city of Barcelona (1,636,732 inhabitants). The Ciutat Vella district has the highest percentage of immigrant population in the city of Barcelona, with 46.3% of the population, representing 48,899 inhabitants. The centrality of this territory and the economic weight of the tourism sector make Ciutat Vella a reference place for hotel accommodation. The Ciutat Vella district is the embryo of the city, offering heritage, culture, history and entertainment.

This study is located at the intersection of youth empowerment and its relationship with the community, exploring how the technique of Observational Drift can contribute to a better understanding of youth dynamics in the public space and, consequently, to the formulation of more effective policies and programs adapted to the real needs of young people. Specifically,

we present its application in the socio-educational field, testing its validity as a technique for community prospection of the population subject to socio-educational care. In our research Observational Drift was the technique used to approach the places, activities and movements of the youth population in the community environments studied and that favoured:

- o The generation of detailed knowledge of youth empowerment processes, based on the confluence of interactions and limitations generated by each community context.
- o The identification of those socio-educational action strategies that contribute most effectively to the empowerment of young people at the community level.

The research is part of the third edition of the HEBE project, which focuses on analysing how the community can contribute to the empowerment of young people in the three territories analysed. The research begins with the creation of a motor group in each of the three territories, with the aim of involving various community agents, thus favouring the social impact of the research (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014). The group is composed of representatives of the research team, the political and technical direction of youth policies, and young people, who guided and validated the instruments, strategies and findings made. The project included the application of Observational Drift as a pilot test for territorial prospection. A working commission composed of members of the research team from all the territories involved was established and was responsible for the design, application and evaluation of the experience. This commission defined the contents and objectives of the Observational Drift prospections. The instruments were validated from an analysis of the first application and the methodological design was described in an Observational Drift guide, detailing objectives, methodology and instruments.

Observation teams were set up for each territory, and to ensure the homogeneity of criteria and methods, some people participated in all 3 teams. The team of field researchers received an 8-hour online training session to present the methodological guide and clarify doubts, ensuring methodological horizontality and consistency in the application. Each team organized their visits to the territory in a complementary way according to the availability of the members. The objective of the observation was to collect information on the presence of and activities carried out by young people in the public space. Specifically, they had to collect information regarding:

- How many young people are present: ages, ethnicities, and aesthetics are observed.
- What activities they carry out.
- What use they make of the facilities: specific for young people, cultural (libraries, civic centres, museums, cultural centres...), educational (secondary schools, vocational training centres, adult training centres...), sports (swimming pools, sports centres, open courts, schoolyards...), social (social services, health centres, NGOs...) and leisure (bars, restaurants, nightclubs...).
- What interactions occur between young people and other age groups.

The observational procedure was carried out through erratic wandering with partners, following groups of young people or carrying out sweeping itineraries through the assigned areas. Observations were made in different time slots (morning, afternoon, evening) and days (weekdays and holidays), recording:

- Entrance and exit of facilities (5-10 minutes).
- Use of squares, parks, gardens and other open public spaces (5-10 minutes).
- Dynamics in the streets (in route).

This non-predefined system allows the observation to be directed towards areas with the highest presence of young people during implementation, optimizing intuitive data collection; however, it is essential to ensure that all areas are observed, making it necessary to track the routes and applications carried out. It may be necessary to reconsider the delineation of observation areas in successive observations. To systematize and contrast the data obtained, two free forms generated in the *Google Forms* application were used online:

- *Form A*: Record of observed activities, being filled in as many times as groups of young people observed.
- *Form B*: Record of drift characteristics and observer team impressions.

The routes were recorded using the *Relive mobile app*, an open-access route recording application, that provides storage to upload photographs if deemed appropriate while respecting the privacy of the people observed. Observational Drift was performed according to the ethical principles of qualitative research, so no personal data or personal images were collected. The training provided to the research team offered ethical guidelines for preserving and respecting privacy. Observation was always limited to open public spaces. The HEBE-III project has been evaluated by the Research Ethics and Biosafety Committee of the University of Girona and has received a favourable judgement with the code: CEBRU0010-22.

Observational Drift provides a robust tool for understanding and analysing youth dynamics in public spaces. It is a methodological technique of spontaneous observation, without a rigid structure that reveals hidden aspects of the environment that otherwise would not be perceived (Careri, 2002). This technique facilitates a critical analysis of the observed reality just as Debord (1958) and the Situationists proposed as a study of cities. It constitutes an opportunity for qualitative analysis that favours the identification and creation of more effective policies and programs adapted to the real needs of young people, promoting, in turn, the active participation of professionals in the generation of knowledge and improving the understanding of the complexity of the youth environment. By rigorously and systematically capturing reality, Observational Drift allows for reflection, from an educational standpoint, on one's own practices and perceptions and how they influence the teaching-learning processes. In this sense, it contributes significantly to the construction of community environments conducive to youth empowerment and the improvement of socio-educational care.

Results

In this research, a total of 15 Observational Drift prospections were carried out between the municipalities of Celrà, the western district of Girona and the Ciutat Vella district of Barcelona. These Observational Drift prospections were carried out in different time slots and days, covering the widest possible variety of situations and times of day. A total of 49 activities were recorded in 24 different locations. Table 1 shows the distribution of hours and activities observed.

Table 1: Time distribution and activities

	Morning from 9.00 am to 2.00 pm	Afternoons from 5.00 pm to 8.00 pm	Saturdays and evenings before holidays (evening - night)
Celrà	1	1	2
Western district (Girona)	1	1	3
Ciutat Vella (Barcelona)	2	3	1

Source: Author's own creation.

The researchers who carried out the Observational Drift prospections were composed of a total of 9 young women, members of the research team and students from the universities involved in the research project. They always worked in groups of 2 and some of them were in more than one territory. The Observational Drift prospections lasted between 38 and 120 minutes, with a median duration of around 60 minutes and a total of 1,004 minutes were used. They took place between November 11th and December 11th, 2021. In 4 out of the 15 Observational Drift prospections carried out, unsafe situations were detected: 3 in Girona, one of them due to walking through a wooded park area and 1 in Celrà. A high influence of the weather conditions was observed; rain and cold resulted in a significant decrease in the presence of young people in public spaces.

Profile of Activities Registered

The study of the socialization activities recorded during the Observational Drift prospections among young people in different public spaces in Barcelona, Celrà and Girona reveals a diversity of interactions and uses of these environments. The most relevant findings are detailed below:

- **Spontaneous Conversations**: 18 groups were observed participating in spontaneous conversations, with a distribution of 6 in Barcelona, 4 in Celrà and 8 in Girona. This result highlights the prevalence of casual conversations as a common form of social interaction among young people in these places.
- **Conversations at the Entry and Exit Points of Facilities**: There were 14 groups talking at the entrances and exits of facilities, with a notable concentration of 8 groups in Barcelona and 6 in Celrà. This data underlines the importance of these points as key places for youth socialization.
- **Groups Listening to Music**: In Celrà, 2 groups dedicated to listening to music in public spaces were identified. This type of activity suggests the need to design specific areas that facilitate this form of interaction without generating conflicts with other uses of space.
- **Sports Practice**: A total of 11 groups were observed practising sports activities, distributed in 4 groups in Celrà and 7 in Girona. Sports practice emerges as a significant activity, underlining the relevance of sports facilities for the physical and social well-being of young people.
- Self-Organized **Music and Dance Events**: 1 self-organized music and dance event was documented in Barcelona. This finding demonstrates the ability of young people to create and participate in their own cultural activities, highlighting the importance of supporting and facilitating such initiatives.

- **School Groups in Organized Visits**: 2 school groups were observed on organized visits in Barcelona, showing the relevance of educational activities outside the classroom as a tool for learning and socialization in the community setting.
- **Intergenerational Arts Group Exhibition**: In Barcelona, 1 group was identified as participating in an intergenerational arts activity exhibition. These types of activities indicate a diverse and enriching use of public space, fostering social cohesion and the intergenerational exchange of knowledge and values.

The results show a varied use of public spaces by young people, highlighting the need to design and manage these spaces in a way that promotes social interaction, physical well-being and cultural expression. The information obtained can be used by youth professionals and urban planners to improve and adapt public spaces to the needs and preferences of the youth population.

Characteristics of young people and spaces

In Celrà, (see Table 2) the observations focused on facilities such as the Municipal Dance School, the Municipal Sports Pavilion, the Youth Centre and various bars. The predominant activities were spontaneous interactions, sports practice, and walking about. The young people observed presented a diversity of origins (Catalan, Spanish, Maghrebi, sub-Saharan, Latino and Gypsy) and an aesthetic mostly marked by the use of branded tracksuits. Observation at Celrà reveals that intergenerational spaces and sports facilities are key meeting points for young people. The diversity of origin and the predominance of sports aesthetics suggest that these spaces are not only used for sports activities but also as places for socializing. For youth professionals, this highlights the need to promote these spaces as points of integration and social cohesion, designing programs that promote coexistence and respect for diversity.

Table 2. Results of the observations carried out in Celrà

Observations made in	Municipal Dance School. Municipal Sports Pavilion. Youth Centre. Bars.
Type of activities	Inflow of young people to facilities or establishments, with some spontaneous interactions. Conversation, walking, wandering or playing sports. Usually spontaneous and unplanned. Good coexistence mostly and drug use at weekends.
Characteristics of young people	Origin and aesthetics difficult to determine Miscellaneous origin: Catalan, Spanish, Maghrebi, Sub-Saharan, Latin America, Gypsy ethnicity, etc. Aesthetic dominance branded tracksuits. 12 to 16 years in public spaces and 17 to 25 years in bars. Mostly boys (although it is the territory where more girls have been observed).
Characteristics of the spaces	Intergenerational spaces in observations. Clean and hygienic places, areas isolated from transport. There are services and facilities, but they are very widespread. Little presence of young people, neighbours and outsiders in general.

Source: Author's own creation.

In the Ciutat Vella district of Barcelona, (see Table 3) the observations were made in squares, wide streets, shops and bars. Activities observed included spontaneous conversations, self-organized street art, and weekend drug use. The diversity of aesthetic profiles and the high presence of facilities and services indicate a complex, dynamic urban environment. The observations in Ciutat Vella underline the importance of public spaces as settings for cultural and social expression. The presence of street art and self-organized events highlights the creative potential of young people. For youth professionals, it is crucial to encourage these spaces as safe places for free expression, promoting activities that constructively channel youth creativity and minimizing risky behaviours such as drug use. However, the diversity of origins among the young people observed in Ciutat Vella posed a challenge in data collection, as the variety of aesthetic profiles made it difficult to identify consistent patterns. This limitation affected the overall analysis, creating a "blind spot" where certain nuances of youth dynamics may not have been fully captured. A more targeted approach would be necessary in future studies to address this gap.

Table 3. Results of the observations made in Ciutat Vella

Observations made in	Large squares and streets. Shops (large commercial chains) and bars.
Type of activities	Unplanned conversations and walking around. Self-organized street art. Good coexistence mostly and drug use at weekends.
Characteristics of young people	Diverse origin and difficult to identify. Predominance of the aesthetics of branded tracksuits, but there is more diversity of profiles: skaters, casual, etc. Mostly boys, between 17 and 25 years old.
Characteristics of the spaces	The least clean and hygienic territory, but the best communicated and illuminated. A lot of facilities and services, as well as activities in all aspects. High police presence. Intergenerational spaces. A strong commercial and touristic atmosphere, but little neighbourhood atmosphere. No green or open areas.

Source: Author's own creation.

In Girona, (see Table 4) the observations focused on the municipal sports centre and the streets and squares of the western district. The predominant activities were spontaneous sports practices, conversations and drug use at weekends. Poor lighting and scattered spaces highlight the lack of adequate infrastructure for youth activities. The observation in Girona highlights the need to improve urban infrastructure to facilitate access to safe, well-lit spaces. Sports practice is a central activity for young people, so youth professionals must work on improving and promoting sports facilities as centres of activity and socialization. In addition, it is essential to

address the issues of lack of security and create more accessible, welcoming spaces for young people.

Table 4: Results of the observations carried out in Girona

Observations made in	Municipal sports centre. Streets and squares.
Type of activities	Activities led by young people and entrances and exits of facilities. Spontaneous and unplanned conversations and sports practice. Good coexistence mostly and drug use at weekends.
Characteristics of young people	Origin: Catalan, Spanish and Maghrebi. Aesthetic dominance of branded tracksuits. Mostly boys between the ages of 12 and 20. Groups between 5 and 10.
Characteristics of the spaces	Isolated areas with poor lighting, but clean and hygienic. In general, young people do not share the space, except in sports facilities. There are services and facilities, but they are very widespread. Little presence of young people, neighbours and outsiders in general in the public space.

Source: Author's own creation.

Limits and constraints of the application of Observational Drift.

Certain implicit limitations and considerations should be considered in the conduct of this research. The observations were made in November and December 2021, which may affect representativeness due to the weather, even though there are no specific restrictions at the time of application, the previous restrictions derived from the Covid-19 pandemic must be considered. The Observational Drift prospections provided a snapshot of a specific moment, thereby being effective in detecting relational dynamics in the community environment at a given time. Replicating the methodology at other times of the year or in different contexts would be necessary to obtain more robust generalizations.

Discussion and conclusions

The Observational Drift prospections carried out in the three territories proved to be an effective strategy to better understand the spaces occupied by young people and the dynamics that develop in these spaces. This technique facilitates a deeper understanding of youth dynamics, allowing practitioners to adjust their interventions and strategies more effectively. Despite the limitations of the application, results were obtained regarding:

- Knowledge of the territory, its physiognomy and environment, the types of spaces and people who inhabit them. In this way, it has been possible to establish

comparisons between the three communities, given that they are very diverse territories, to be able to see the similarities and differences.

- Although the observations made cannot be extrapolated, they do represent the youth of the three communities at a given time and have validity by themselves, since the observations have been made following a rigorous methodology.
- The drifts have also helped the research team to develop a very specific information collection technique that can provide a lot of information when we want to discover the reality of a community in-depth and first-hand.

The Observational Drift prospections revealed diverse patterns of youth activity, from spontaneous conversations and sports practices to self-organized music and dance events. The active participation of young people in the research process played a crucial role in shaping these observations, as their involvement allowed for a more integrated understanding of how they engage with their environments. This participatory approach enriched the observational process, providing deeper insights into the specific characteristics of young people and the spaces they occupy, such as diversity of origin, the predominance of certain aesthetics and variability in the use of facilities and services. Specifically, it made it possible to identify facilities with a large influx of visitors, something which must be considered in the analysis of facilities for young people. Associationism and socio-community supply are an axis of dynamization (Carmona and Fernández, 2018), and according to our observations, this is also true in the youth population. The uses of public spaces show a need for spaces for groups of young people to listen to music and have spontaneous encounters without disturbing older people or families with young children. The presence of a wide network of sports facilities is indicated, with regular use by young people. Obvious health benefits for this group can be concluded from this. In Barcelona, the impact of tourism is verified in two observations made: the first refers to the presence of groups of young people making organized cultural visits; the second is an observation of tourist occupation of public spaces, the presence of informal groups being reduced with respect to other territories.

Regarding profiles, a certain homogenization of profiles in accordance to geographical areas was observed. The sports aesthetic being prominent in some areas. Observational Drift prospections provide us with very valuable information: public space is not designed for all young people, and it has ceased to be predominant as a meeting space and generator of possible spontaneous and diverse activities. Currently, the spaces are occupied by homogeneous profiles of young people with a specific type of activity, the urban space being zoned according to its uses. This trend implies the exclusion of some profiles and the decrease in exchanges between groups. There is a habitual use of multilingualism: Catalan, Spanish, Maghrebi, sub-Saharan dialects, etc. The presence on the street is mostly male, in small groups (from 5 to 10 young people), and it develops with cordiality and good coexistence. Drug use was most commonly observed at weekends. Self-managed spaces have shown a greater presence of young people than professionalised spaces aimed at the youth collective. The observations did not capture enough information about women and disabled people, and this was considered at the interviews and focus groups in the HEBE-III project as a whole.

These findings demonstrate the effectiveness of Observational Drift as a strategy for understanding the community being researched and as a highly valuable diagnostic tool for professionals and administrations regarding the configuration of public spaces. Bunge (2007) has already pointed out observation as a basic empirical procedure of social reality and Morin

(1985, 1986) introduced us to the idea of complex thinking and shows us that there are as many realities as interpretations of it, making it necessary to observe and study the relationships between different perspectives to interpret reality in a complex way. This does not mean that it is not possible to carry out valid and reliable scientific research, provided that the research method is designed and developed with criteria of scientific rigour. Casadevall and Fang (2016) specify it as redundancy in experimental design, solid statistical analysis, error recognition, avoidance of logical errors and intellectual honesty. Observational Drift, as it has been applied, is shown to be a powerful strategy for observing and describing reality and one that facilitates the observation of dynamics and identifying agents which can and should subsequently be analysed through other techniques and research methods. It is an effective practice for the identification of emergent content that must be considered in subsequent phases of study. We also highlight the power of critical analysis of reality. This is a technique which applies to non-participative research, representing another study strategy to be contrasted with other participative techniques, insofar as they provide a prior approach to participatory work and provide data for the identification of stakeholder maps. We place it in the first of the phases described by Colmenares (2012), who lists 4 phases of participatory action research: discovering the problem, construction of the action plan, execution of the action plan and reflection process. Discovering the problem involves observing reality, listening to voices, and understanding needs; an exercise that should undoubtedly begin with the analysis of reality. Observational Drift can even be a research strategy in participatory research, despite differing from participant observation. In the design and interpretation of the information obtained, the biases derived from the profile of the research team must be considered: age, gender, belonging to the environment, etc. may be conditioning factors of the observation that must be observed and compared with other research strategies. The analysis of different perceptions of the participating team can also be an interesting secondary object of research.

Previously, we extensively described the importance of Observational Drift in educational research, but we should also point to another methodological opportunity linked to socio-educational action. Socio-educational accompaniment, as written by Planella (2008), requires prior knowledge of the environment, the establishment of an educational bond and an attitude of recognition of the people served so that they can make their decisions and assume the consequences of their decisions. Observational Drift is shown to be a strategy for approaching the territory to critically question reality, allowing educational teams to analyse the practices and their effects on the territory and the population served. An opportunity to recognize the environment, the people who inhabit it and their relationships, to be able to accompany without directing, respecting autonomy in decision-making (Canimas, 2010) with a commitment to the fight against inequalities and the improvement of coexistence. We must recommend Observational Drift as a socio-educational practice to initiate action in a given context, as well as to apply periodically as a strategy for observing the impact of our professional action. Adrià Trescents, one of the first street educators in Spain who carried out his social work in the Raval of Barcelona (a neighbourhood with a high rate of poverty and social vulnerability) in the 1970s and 1980s, defended the idea of the street as an office, arguing the need to move through the spaces inhabited by those to whom we direct socio-educational action (Pereira, 2014). A quality socio-educational practice should never be disconnected from reality. Through *Drifting Observation*, we have demonstrated that it allows for careful observation of the presence, relationships, and activities of young people within their community—a strategy essential for designing socio-educational actions. At this point, we have shown how *Drifting Observation* is a valid qualitative technique for observing reality, much like the biographical approach (Güelman,

2024), which enables the mapping of collective stories that support the critical analysis of societal issues in both research and socio-educational action. From our experience, we have obtained some lessons, which we present below:

- Observational Drift has proven to be a valuable tool in socio-educational research, not only for data collection but also for engaging professionals in direct, contextualized observation of youth spaces. By physically being present in these spaces, professionals gain insights that would otherwise be inaccessible.

- We recommend incorporating this technique regularly in fieldwork, with periodic observations throughout the year to capture changing youth dynamics. This will enhance the understanding of youth communities and inform better policy and program development.

- The application of Observational Drift requires methodological rigor. It involves a carefully designed system, supporting software, a large professional team, and significant time investment. In our study, the methodological manual and team training ensured consistency and comparability of the data collected. We also recommend conducting observations in pairs to provide contrasting perspectives and ensure researcher safety.

- Based on our experience, we recommend simplifying the data collection grids used in Observational Drift to streamline the process. Additionally, greater attention should be paid to personal characteristics, such as age, gender, and disabilities, to ensure that all profiles are adequately represented in the analysis.

- External factors such as climate, territorial mobility, cultural events, and ongoing conflicts must be considered, as they can affect the results and may require additional rounds of observation.

- Lastly, while Observational Drift is an effective qualitative method for situational observation in a specific time and space, its generalization would demand extensive fieldwork. We recommend using it as a prospecting tool alongside other complementary strategies to achieve a more comprehensive understanding.

The application of Observational Drift in the HEBE project has demonstrated its validity as a community prospecting technique and methodological tool in socio-educational research. This methodology offers a non-intrusive yet systematized perspective, facilitating a comprehensive approach to the reality of young people and promoting more effective interventions in the field of youth policies. It is a prospecting method that allows the collection of emergent information in the relational microsystem of young people (family, professionals, educational centres, work, neighbourhood, friends, etc.), observation of the support relationships of the exosystem, and examination of the effects of social policies, economic resources, and service networks that are part of the exosystem and mesosystem of young people (Llena et. al. 2023) providing contextual tools that can facilitate strategies promoting youth empowerment. One of the most significant findings is the need for professionals working with young people to take to the streets and directly observe the spaces they occupy. This methodology not only promotes a deeper understanding of youth dynamics but also allows practitioners to adjust their interventions and strategies more effectively. Observational Drift provides a detailed picture of how young people use public space and how they interact with each other and their environment. This information is crucial for designing policies and programmes that truly respond to the needs and realities of young people. Direct observation helps identify areas of opportunity, underused community resources, and potential interventions to improve youth coexistence and empowerment.

Note

[1] HEBE Project. Identification of factors that enhance and limit youth empowerment: Analysis of educator discourses and practices. Project financed by MICIU - State R&D&I Programme, Society Challenges 2017. Ref.: Ref.: PID2020-119939RB-I00-R. Website: http://www.projectehebe.com/

[2] For more information on context data, see *Celrà Community Report*. https://dugi-doc.udg.edu/handle/10256/23801

[3] For more information on context data, see Esquerra del Ter (Girona) Community Report. https://dugi-doc.udg.edu/handle/10256/23578

[4] For more information on context data, see Ciutat Vella (Barcelona) Community Report. https://dugi-doc.udg.edu/handle/10256/24650

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Corrections:

1. Consistency in in-text citation styles is required in places and 6.6. Overall, the paper is well-written. Some attention to in-text citations and paragraphing is required. And 3. Attention to paragraphing is needed. There are too many short paragraphs which make for a somewhat disjointed reading structure.

We have carefully revised the in-text citations to ensure consistency throughout the manuscript, adhering to the APA style. Additionally, we have merged and reorganized some of the shorter paragraphs to improve the overall flow and readability of the text. These changes were made to enhance the coherence of the argument and provide a smoother reading experience. At the same time, we have carefully reviewed and corrected the bibliography. All references have been updated with consistent formatting, including proper capitalization, use of italics, DOI formatting, and removal of unnecessary location details.

2. It would be helpful to for the readers to be offered a little more on what the other 2 parts of the project revealed and then connecting them with this one.

We have expanded the section defining "community" within the HEBE project by incorporating brief references to the two previous phases. These phases focused on exploring youth empowerment from both the perspectives of young people and educators. Their findings have been instrumental in shaping the current phase, offering a more comprehensive context for validating the application of *Drifting Observation* as a research and socio-educational strategy in this third stage of the project.

3. Attention to paragraphing is needed. There are too many short paragraphs which make for a somewhat disjointed reading structure.

We have grouped together and addressed some comments that were related to similar issues, as mentioned above.

4. pag 6. Observation procedure is carried out through erratic wanderings. Could a little more detail be provided on the limitations provided by this fluctuating aspect of the method?
Recommendations on how to correct potential deviations resulting from erratic observation have been incorporated (pag 6)

5. Bringing in the young people to be part of the research is very inclusive. Perhaps that aspect of the research could be more cogently woven into the discussion, especially its impact on the way OD flows.

We have now incorporated this aspect into the discussion section, highlighting how the active involvement of young people in the research enriched the Drifting Observation methodology. Specifically, we explain how their participation allowed for a deeper understanding of their engagement with their environments, which in turn enhanced the observational process and the insights gained about the use of public

spaces and facilities. Also, we have strengthened the discussion to highlight how their participation enriched the *Drifting Observation* methodology. Specifically, we expanded on how youth involvement influenced the flow of observations, allowing for more inclusive data collection and a deeper understanding of their dynamics. We have also added recommendations for simplifying data grids and considering diverse personal characteristics (age, gender, disabilities) to ensure comprehensive representation.

6. This method also has a non-inclusive aspect –participation and community building can be affected by dis/ability –is that considered anywhere? How are the young people sourced and what factors may be perceived as exclusionary on this process?

   we have indicated the limitations, recommended the combination with other research techniques (pag 12)

7. Some more detail on the actual demographics -- infrastructure, schools and other educational institutions in the area, socio-economic factors as affecting the observation sites-- would help the lay reader understand the paper more comprehensively.

   We have made a general description of the three contexts we have analysed. We have also put the reference of the reports, where all the demographic data of each community can be consulted (pag 5-6)

8. Page 10 -- Table on Ciutat Vella—Origins of young people have been set out as too diverse and difficult to identify. What is the impact of that on the method of data collection and overall critical analysis as it appears to be a blind spot in the research?

   We have carefully addressed the suggestions made. Specifically, we revised the consistency of in-text citations and restructured paragraphs to improve the overall flow. Additionally, we incorporated the participatory role of youth in the research process and addressed the challenges posed by the diversity of origins in Ciutat Vella, which affected the data collection and analysis.

9. Pg 12— Clear limitation of OD noted which is appreciated. Nonetheless, there is scope for researcher bias to creep in. OD as a method is one in which researcher positionality must be taken into consideration and any such bias identified and acknowledged.

   his observation has been qualified and made more explícit pag 13

10. Though socio-educational care and social pedagogy are highlighted, it is important to acknowledge that this method is connected to early childhood observation practice.

    have been better indicated the socio-educational applications.(pag 5)

11. There appear to be unsafe spaces observed—the lack of safety and gender perceptions might make for an interesting sidelight on the issue.
    Has been incorporated in pag 13.

12. ". . . an observation of tourist occupation of public spaces, the presence of informal groups being reduced with respect to other territories. – The impact of this on OD needs to be discussed in more depth here especially given the push back for tourists as seen in the summer of 2024 in Barcelona.

    The impact of tourism on everyday life was the subject of study and we believe it should be explored further in future research. OD can contribute elements, but as it deals with perceptions, other strategies such as focus groups are more appropriate, and their analysis is reflected in other articles and studies.

13. Ethical aspects of OD need consideration. At times, could an accusation of voyeurism be labelled at researchers?

    The limitations of the observation have been made explicit, avoiding risk of voyeurism pag 7.