

CASE STUDY

Degrees of participation

Non-participation

Ethnographic observation divides into two main types: non-participant and participant. In the case of *non-participant* observation, the researcher is never directly involved in the actions of the actors, but observes them from outside the actors' visual horizon. For example, observation may be made through a one-way mirror, as in ethnographic experiments, or in the research by Bales et al. (1951), who observed classroom interactions between teachers and pupils. The behaviors of social actors can also be observed from a distance, as in Collet and Marsh (1974), who positioned a video recorder on a building overlooking Oxford Circus, London, in order to film the proxemics of pedestrians as they crossed the street. This kind of observation is open to various criticisms, of which the most serious is that it fails to grasp the point of view of the actors observed and relies on objectivist ethnography.

Passive participation

Participant observation modulates among various degrees of participation and involvement. The lowest level is *passive* participation, where the ethnographer is a spectator of the scene under study, maintaining a certain distance from it and never intervening. Typical examples of this kind of participation are observations conducted in law courts – during trials for public drunkenness, as in Spradley (1970), or for traffic offences, as in Pollner (1974) – where the researchers mix with the public and follow proceedings from the public gallery. Hall (1976) used the same method to carry out observations in six dance schools.

Moderate participation

The majority of ethnographic studies are based on *moderate* participation. In this case, the researcher assumes an intermediate position between being a complete insider – a member of the group studied (as in complete participation) – and being a complete outsider (as in non-participation). A particular technique used for moderate participation is 'shadowing': which is when the researcher flanks an actor (with his or her consent) engaged in his or her routine work, without ever intervening but acting as the person's shadow.

Active participation

In the case of *active* participation, the researcher is not content to observe and participate marginally in the everyday activities of social actors, but instead seeks to learn those activities and to put them into practice. For example, Nelson (1969) not only studied Eskimos but also learned how to hunt with them, reaching a skill level sufficient not to make a fool of himself. The goal of active participation (which is also recommended by Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979: 248–53) is not to

become like the 'natives,' and acquire their abilities and social skills, but rather to gain better understanding of their practices.

Complete participation

The highest degree of involvement occurs with *complete* participation. In this case, the ethnographer lives with the subjects whom he or she is studying and tends to assume a pre-established role which is difficult to shed as the research proceeds. This technique guarantees close intimacy with the social actors, but it also severely restricts freedom of movement outside the socially recognized role. Examples of complete participation are the studies by Becker (1963), who played jazz in night clubs; by Scott (1963), who frequented illegal gambling dens as a player; by Rosenhan (1973) and his group, who acted as pseudopatients in various psychiatric hospitals; or Wiseman (1979), who owned a second-hand clothes store. Riemer (1977) provides a survey of studies of this kind conducted in a variety of settings, among them taxis, bars, police stations, concentration camps and clinics.