

Participant Observation

The Methodology of Participant Observation

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The Methodology of Participant Observation

[p. 12 ↓]

This chapter introduces and defines the methodology of participant observation. Uses and limitations of participant observation are identified and described. The methodology of participant observation is defined and illustrated by seven distinguishing features. Throughout this chapter, participant observation is compared and contrasted with other methodologies and methods, particularly experiments and surveys.

USES OF PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

The methodology of participant observation is appropriate for studies of almost every aspect of human existence. Through participant observation, it is possible to describe what goes on, who or what is involved, when and where things happen, how they occur, and why—at least from the standpoint of participants—things happen as they do in particular situations. The methodology of participant observation is exceptional for studying processes, relationships among people and events, the organization of people and events, continuities over time, and patterns, as well as the immediate sociocultural contexts in which human existence unfolds.

Participant observation is especially appropriate for scholarly problems when

—little is known about the phenomenon (a newly formed group or movement, emotion work, fundamentalist Christian schools, improvised human conduct);

- there are important differences between the views of insiders as opposed to outsiders (ethnic groups, labor unions, management, subcultures such as occultists, poker players, or nude beachers, and even occupations like physicians, ministers, newscasters, or scientists);
- the phenomenon is somehow obscured from the view of outsiders (private, intimate interactions and groups, such as physical and mental illness, teenage sexuality, family life, or religious ritual); or
- the phenomenon is hidden from public view (crime and deviance, secretive groups and organizations, such as drug users and dealers, cultic and sectarian religions).

The methodology of participant observation is not appropriate, however, for every scholarly problem. Questions about fairly large populations, the precise causal relationships among limited sets of variables, and measurable amounts of something are better addressed by other methods, such as surveys or experiments. Participant observation is most appropriate when certain minimal conditions are present:

- the research problem is concerned with human meanings and interactions viewed from the insiders' perspective;
- the phenomenon of investigation is observable within an everyday life situation or setting;
- the researcher is able to gain access to an appropriate setting;
- the phenomenon is sufficiently limited in size and location to be studied as a case;
- study questions are appropriate for case study; and
- the research problem can be addressed by qualitative data gathered by direct observation and other means pertinent to the field setting.

Participant observation is especially appropriate for exploratory studies, descriptive studies, and studies aimed at generating theoretical interpretations. Though less useful for testing theories, findings of participant observational research certainly are appropriate for critically examining theories and other claims to knowledge.

FEATURES OF PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

The methodology of participant observation consists of principles, strategies, procedures, methods, and techniques of research. Participant observation is defined here in terms of seven basic features:

- a special interest in human meaning and interaction as viewed from the perspective of people who are insiders or members of particular situations and settings;
- location in the here and now of everyday life situations and settings as the foundation of inquiry and method;
- a form of theory and theorizing stressing interpretation and understanding of human existence;
- a logic and process of inquiry that is open-ended, flexible, opportunistic, and requires constant redefinition of what is problematic, based on facts gathered in concrete settings of human existence;
- an in-depth, qualitative, case study approach and design;
- the performance of a participant role or roles that involves establishing and maintaining relationships with natives in the field; and
- the use of direct observation along with other methods of gathering information.

Ultimately, the methodology of participant observation aims to generate practical and theoretical truths about human life grounded in the realities of daily existence.

THE INSIDERS' VIEWPOINT

In the course of daily life, people make sense of the world around them; they give it meaning and they interact on the basis of these meanings (Schutz, 1967; Blumer, 1969; Denzin, 1978). If people define a situation as real, it is real in its consequences (Thomas and Thomas, 1928). People, of course, may be “mistaken” about what something means, yet even erroneous beliefs have real consequences. The world of everyday life constitutes *reality* for its inhabitants, natives, insiders, or members (Lyman and Scott, 1970, 1975; Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The insiders' conception of reality is not directly accessible to aliens, outsiders, or nonmembers, all of whom necessarily experience it initially as a stranger (Schutz, 1967; Simmel, 1950).

It is not possible to acquire more than a very crude notion of the insiders' world, for instance, until you comprehend the culture and language that is used to communicate its meanings (Hall, 1959, 1966). Greater comprehension requires that you understand the words of a language as they are used in particular situations (see Hall, 1976). Insiders manage, manipulate, and negotiate meanings in particular situations, intentionally and unintentionally obscuring, hiding, or concealing these meanings further from the viewpoint of outsiders (Goffman, 1959, 1974; Douglas, 1976).

The methodology of participant observation focuses on the meanings of human existence as seen from the standpoint of insiders (Znaniecki, 1934; Spradley, 1980). The world of everyday life as viewed from the standpoint of insiders is the fundamental reality to be described by [p. 15 ↓] participant observation. Put still differently, the methodology of participant observation seeks to uncover, make accessible, and reveal the meanings (realities) people use to make sense out of their daily lives. In placing the meaning of everyday life first, the methodology of participant observation differs from approaches that begin with concepts defined by way of existing theories and hypotheses.

Ellis (1986) became a participant observer in two Chesapeake communities for the purpose of describing everyday life activities within these fishing communities from the perspective of its members. Latour and Woolgar (1979) and Lynch (1985) described the insiders' conception of laboratory science using participant observational

methods. Through participant observation, Mitchell (1983) described the experiences and meanings of mountaineering from the insiders' viewpoint. Kleinman (1984) used a participant observational methodology to reveal the meanings of seminary life from the standpoint of insiders. Chenitz and Swanson (1986) advocated participant observation for developing theories grounded in practice that are useful for nursing. Gallimeier (1987, forthcoming) focused on meanings and experiences of professional hockey players on the basis of participant observation of this sport. In short, then, the methodology of participant observation provides direct experiential and observational access to the insiders' world of meaning.

THE WORLD OF EVERYDAY LIFE

The world of everyday life is for the methodology of participant observation the ordinary, usual, typical, routine, or natural environment of human existence. This world stands in contrast to environments created and manipulated by researchers, as illustrated by experiments and surveys. In comparison with their natural habitat, animals are known to behave and interact differently in environments (such as a zoo or a laboratory) constructed and manipulated by researchers. Human beings likewise behave differently when they know they are being studied, especially when the researcher is very obtrusively manipulating the environment (see Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939; Douglas, 1976; Douglas et al., 1980).

The *here* and *now* of everyday life is important to the methodology of participant observation in at least two fundamental ways. One, that is where the researcher begins with the process of defining and refining [p. 16 ↓] issues and problems for study. Two, they are where the researcher participates. No matter the original source of the study problem (abstract theory, practical experience, coincidence, or whatever), precisely what will be studied and how it will be regarded as problematic must be clarified and refined by reference to human existence in everyday life situations. Similarly, the researcher participates and observes in everyday life situations. Every effort must be made to minimize the extent to which the researcher disrupts and otherwise intrudes as an alien, or nonparticipant, in the situations studied. Taking the role of a participant provides the researcher with a means of conducting fairly *unobtrusive* observations.

Sanders (1988), for instance, participated directly in four tattoo parlors as a “regular” while observing this everyday life environment. To study the social world of preschool children, Mandell (1988) participated with and observed children on playgrounds, in classrooms, hallways, bathrooms, and lunchrooms of two day-care centers. Hockey (1986) studied the culture of enlisted men in the British Army from the concrete situations and settings of initial recruitment and basic training, to daily life in an infantry battalion, patrol in Northern Ireland, and rambunctious off-duty social life. To study stress and mental health as well as design an appropriate intervention strategy in a southern Black community, Dressier (1987) participated in and observed this environment, gathered information from key informants, and recruited research assistants and consultants from the community being studied.

INTERPRETATIVE THEORY AND THEORIZING

The methodology of participant observation aims to provide practical and theoretical truths about human existence. From this standpoint, a “theory” may be defined as a set of concepts and generalizations. Theories provide a perspective, a way of seeing, or an interpretation aimed at understanding some phenomenon (see Blumer, 1969; Agar, 1986). The methodology of participant observation provokes concepts and generalizations formulated as interpretative theories. These concepts and generalizations may be used to examine critically existing hypotheses and theories. Concepts, generalizations, and interpretations inspired through participant observation are useful for making practical decisions (see Chenitz and Swanson, 1986; Williams, 1986).

Interpretative theory differs from conceptions of theory aimed at explanation, prediction, and control of human phenomena (see Douglas [p. 17 ↓] et al., 1980; Polkinghorne, 1983; Agar, 1986). Explanatory theories are composed of logically interrelated propositions. Ideally, they contain lawlike propositions providing causal explanations. Explanatory approaches to theorizing stress the testing of propositions (or hypotheses) anticipating relations among concepts (see Wallace, 1971; Gibbs, 1972; Blalock, 1971).

Explanatory theorizing, especially in the form of hypothesis testing, involves a “logic of verification” (Kaplan, 1964). This logic operates by (1) the definition of a problem for study in the form of a hypothesis or hypotheses derived from or otherwise related to an abstract body of theoretical knowledge, (2) the definition of concepts contained in these hypotheses by procedures for measuring them (called operationalization), and (3) the precise measurement of concepts, preferably *quantitatively* (by degrees or amounts). Experiments and many forms of survey research, for instance, are employed for the purpose of testing hypotheses and explanatory theories.

Altheide (1976), to illustrate, conducted a study of television news through participant observation. He was interested in bias or distortions in news making. Having reviewed relevant scholarly literature, Altheide was aware of several different perspectives on this issue, as well as specific contentions (hypotheses) explaining why or how news is biased. He suspected that bias was somehow related to how news workers put together television news programs. With this general idea, but without specific hypotheses (operational definitions or measures), Altheide set out to describe news workers' images of their jobs and how they actually did their work. His findings describe in qualitative detail how practical and organizational features of doing news work promote ways of looking at events that distort them. The emergent, interpretative theory of the news perspective as bias provided a solid, empirical basis for questioning the accuracy of some previous claims (if not the complete rejection of these hypotheses) and reinterpreting other theoretical claims. This study, furthermore, resulted in subsequent research and refinement of Altheide's interpretative theory of news making (see Altheide, 1985; Altheide and Snow, 1979).

The participant observational study of delinquents by Emerson (1969) resulted in the more general concept of “last resorts” (Emerson, 1981). Suttles's (1968) participant observational study of slums led to theorizing about communities (Suttles, 1972). Irwin's (1970) participant observational study of prisoners resulted in a typology of felons and a theoretical critique of contemporary prisons. Fox's (1987) participant [p. 18 ↓] observational study of “punks” resulted in a typology of punk status and a general conception of the informal stratification of this antiestablishment subculture. Goffman's (1961) highly influential theoretical concept of “total institutions” emerged from participant observation in a hospital (see also Richard, 1986).

AN OPEN-ENDED LOGIC AND PROCESS OF INQUIRY

Participant observational inquiry may proceed on the basis of some more or less abstract idea or it may derive from involvement with a field setting. Either way, what is problematic must be defined or redefined specifically by reference to the actual study setting. The methodology of participant observation stresses a “logic of discovery,” a process aimed at instigating concepts, generalizations, and theories (Kaplan, 1964). It, in other words, aims to build theories grounded in concrete human realities (Glazer and Strauss, 1967; Agar, 1986). This requires a flexible, open-ended process for identifying and defining a problem or problems for study, concepts, and appropriate procedures for collecting and evaluating evidence.

The methodology of participant observation encourages the researcher to begin with the immediate experience of human life in concrete situations and settings, and make the most of whatever opportunities are presented (see Whyte, 1984). Scott (1968), for instance, took advantage of a longstanding interest in horse racing to conduct a participant observational study of the racing game. While the researcher may have a theoretical interest in being there, exactly what concepts are important, how they are or are not related, and what, therefore, is problematic should remain open and subject to refinement and definition based on what the researcher is able to uncover and observe. This process and logic of inquiry requires the researcher to define the problem of study and be constantly open to its redefinition based on information collected in the field. It further encourages the researcher to define concepts by providing elaborate *qualitative* descriptions of them in terms of what people do and say in everyday life situations.

Wallis (1977), for instance, used participant observation to gather information on Scientology concerning a set of “broad themes” rather than hypotheses. Weppner (1983) participated in an addiction treatment [p. 19 ↓] program prior to defining problems precisely for further study. Much like Weppner, Sudnow (1978) studied and played jazz piano before making the organization of improvised conduct the subject of study. In other words, Sudnow's special interest in how improvised conduct is

organized and accomplished partly derived from and was informed by his piano-playing experiences.

IN-DEPTH CASE STUDIES

Case studies take a variety of forms, most of which do not involve participant observations (see Yin, 1984). The methodology of participant observation, however, generally is practiced as a form of *case study*. This involves the detailed description and analysis of an individual case (Becker, 1968, pp. 232–38). Case studies stress the holistic examination of a phenomenon, and they seek to avoid the separation of components from the larger context to which these matters may be related. The case studied may be a culture, society, community, subculture, organization, group, or phenomenon such as beliefs, practices, or interactions, as well as almost any other aspect of human existence. Gans (1962), for instance, studied the case of urban villagers. Lofland (1966) studied the case of religious conversion. Becker et al. (1961) studied the case of student medical school culture.

Case studies conducted by way of participant observation attempt to describe comprehensively and exhaustively a phenomenon in terms of a research problem. Scholarly definition of the problem generally provides a logic justifying study of a single case. The phenomenon, for instance, may be sufficiently important or unique to justify intensive investigation. Whether or not, or to the extent to which, the case is representative of some larger population may be regarded as not especially relevant, or this matter simply may be left open to further study. Comparative case studies generally depend on previous studies of a single case. Ellis (1986), for instance, participated in two fishing communities. This enabled her to compare and contrast different cases. The logic of the case study clearly differs from the survey research emphasis on gathering data on a large cross section of some population, or the emphasis of experiments on demonstrating causation by control and comparison of variables.

For some participant observational studies, questions concerning representativeness or possible bias resulting from study of a single [p. 20 ↓] instance receive further attention (see Douglas, 1985). The researcher may have good reasons for focusing on a single case, such as an argument that it is “typical,” among other bases for sampling

theoretically (Glazer and Strauss, 1967). The use of nonprobability (or theoretical) sampling techniques also applies to selective observations conducted *within* a case. Although participant observational case studies generally do not employ conventional methods of probability sampling, such techniques certainly may be used. Participant observation in this way differs from most forms of survey research, as well as from experiments that use probability to select subjects.

Hochschild (1983), for instance, was interested in the private and public face of human emotions, or simply “emotion work.” This study was exploratory and aimed to generate theory. Partly for this reason, Hochschild conducted an in-depth case study—based on a participant observational methodology—of emotion work, rather than conducting an experiment or some form of survey research.

Theoretical logics were used to select phenomena for study. Initially, a questionnaire was used like a fishing net to catch indications of ways people manage emotions. Hochschild had a variety of good theoretical reasons for participating as a flight attendant while observing: emotion work is especially important in service occupations; flight attendants are neither high nor low prestige; and male flight attendants make possible gender comparisons. Interviews were conducted with people in this industry (union officials, pilots, bill collectors, a sex therapist, a receptionist, recruiters, managers, and other attendants) partly to gain different existential perspectives on emotion work. Even the selection of Delta Airlines was justified theoretically; its standards were higher and its worker demands lower than other companies. Emotion work was more visible and sharper in this exaggerated instance. Hochschild does supplement the Delta data, however, with observations of several other airlines, thereby checking for too extraordinary results.

THE PARTICIPANT ROLE

The methodology of participant observation requires that the researcher become directly involved as a participant in peoples' daily lives. The participant role provides access to the world of everyday life from the standpoint of a member or insider. Human meaning and interaction is approached through sympathetic introspection (Cooley, [p. 21 ↓] [1930] 1969), *verstehen* (Weber, 1949), a humanistic coefficient (Znaniecki,

1934), or sympathetic reconstruction (Maclver, 1942). Participant observation, in other words, is a very special strategy and method for gaining access to the interior, seemingly subjective aspects of human existence (see Krieger, 1985). Through participation, the researcher is able to observe and experience the meanings and interactions of people from the role of an insider.

Participant involvements may range from the performance of nominal and marginal roles to the performance of native, insider, or membership roles (Junker, 1960; Gold, 1954, 1958, 1969). The researcher's involvement may be overt (with the knowledge of insiders), *covert* (without the knowledge of insiders), or—most likely—insiders selectively will be provided with knowledge of the researcher's interests and purposes (see Adler and Adler, 1987; Adler, Adler, and Rochford, 1986). It is highly desirable for the participant observer to perform multiple roles during the course of a project, and gain at least a comfortable degree of rapport, even intimacy, with the people, situations, and settings of research.

As a participant, the researcher must sustain access once it has been granted, and maintain relationships with people in the field (see Johnson, 1975). The relationship between the participant as observer, people in the field setting, and the larger context of human interaction is one of the key components of this methodology. The character of field relations heavily influences the researcher's ability to collect accurate, truthful information.

Hayano (1982), for instance, became a professional cardplayer (became the phenomenon studied) as part of his participant observational investigation of poker players. Similarly, Sudnow (1978) became a jazz pianist to study improvised conduct. Hayano and Sudnow, it should be noted, were interested in poker playing and jazz piano for important biographical (or personal) reasons not directly related to scholarly concerns. Forrest (1986) used apprenticeship strategically as a participant observer role. Peshkin (1986), on the other hand, nominally participated in activities at a fundamentalist Christian school studied while observing and retaining the identity of a researcher. Likewise, Wallis's (1977) participation in Scientology was limited to a brief training period. Douglas became a nude beacher to study this scene, but he also participated as a member of the home owners' association opposed to the nude beach (Douglas and Rasmussen, with Flanagan, 1977). Hayano, Sudnow, and

Wallis participated covertly for the most [p. 22 ↓] part, while Peshkin's participant role was entirely overt. Douglas did not reveal his research interests (and certainly not his participation as a nude beacher) to the home owners, but, depending on the circumstances, his everyday life identities sometimes were acknowledged to the nude beachers.

METHODS OF COLLECTING INFORMATION

Direct observation is the primary method of gathering information, but the participant observer usually uses other strategies. Depending on the nature and extent of participant involvement, the researcher's immediate experience can be an extremely valuable source of data (Cooley, [1930] 1969; Znaniecki, 1934, pp. 157–67).

Documents (newspapers, letters, diaries, memoranda), as well as other forms of communication (audio recordings, photography, videotapes, radio, television) and artifacts (art, tools, clothing, buildings) are readily available in many field settings. The researcher may find informants knowledgeable about matters of interest, and gather life histories (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918–19). Participant observers commonly gather data through casual conversations, in-depth, informal, and unstructured interviews, as well as formally structured interviews and questionnaires (see Fine, 1987; Wallis, 1977).

Participant observation may be conducted by a single researcher. Or researchers may employ a team strategy (see Lynd and Lynd, 1929; Warner and Lunt, 1941, 1942; Warner and Srole, 1945; Warner, 1959; Vidich and Bensman, 1968; Becker et al., 1961). Team strategies offer distinctive advantages, such as the possibility of performing different participant and observer roles simultaneously as well as exploiting various talents and identities (such as gender) of the researchers (see Golde, 1970; Douglas, 1976; Douglas and Rasmussen, with Flanagan, 1977; Warren and Rasmussen, 1977).

It is extremely important that the results of participant observational study be recorded. Participant observers generally keep a diary or log of activities in the field, unique experiences, and other matters of possible interest. The researcher may keep written

records or tape-record observations while in the field or shortly after some period of observation. Action may be recorded by way of photographic, audio, and/or audio-video equipment. Increasingly, computers have been employed to record, file, and otherwise assist in the organization and analysis of research materials (see Conrad and Reinhartz, 1984).

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Hochschild (1983), to illustrate, used questionnaires, several forms of interviewing, and direct observation in studying emotion work. Wallis (1977) depended extensively on documents, used a questionnaire, conducted informal interviews, and briefly participated as an observer in collecting data on Scientology. Fine (1987) participated and observed among Little Leaguers, and used a questionnaire. Altheide (1976) used direct observation and formal and informal interviewing, collected documents and newscasts, and engaged in natural experiments in studying news making. Hayano (1982), in studying poker players, depended primarily on observation and memory, making records after a period of intense participation. Johnson (1975) recorded the results of direct observation and informal interviews on an audio recording during and after periods of participant observation of welfare workers. Spradley (1970) used direct observation, informal and formal interviews, a life history, and depended on native informants for information on urban alcoholics.

SUMMARY

The methodology of participant observation is appropriate for a wide range of scholarly problems pertinent to human existence. It focuses on human interaction and meaning viewed from the insiders' viewpoint in everyday life situations and settings. It aims to generate practical and theoretical truths formulated as interpretative theories. The methodology of participant observation involves a flexible, open-ended, opportunistic process and logic of inquiry through which what is studied constantly is subject to redefinition based on field experience and observation. Participant observation generally is practiced as a form of case study that concentrates on in-depth description and analysis of some phenomenon or set of phenomena. Participation is a strategy for gaining access to otherwise inaccessible dimensions of human life and experience.

Direct observation and experience are primary forms and methods of data collection, but the researcher also may conduct interviews, collect documents, and use other methods of gathering information.

Participant observation is appropriate for a wide range of problems, especially when the meanings people use to define and interact with their ordinary environment are central issues. Though especially useful for exploratory and descriptive research purposes, participant observation results in generalizations useful for forming new theories as well as [p. 24 ↓] testing existing ones. The methodology of participant observation differs considerably from positivistic approaches, especially experiments and surveys.

Unlike participant observation, experiments demand control and manipulation of the research environment. Experiments are best suited for testing specific hypotheses and theories conceived in terms of causal relationships among quantitatively measured variables. Unlike participant observation, experiments are highly obtrusive and not especially useful for exploratory purposes. Survey research is best suited for collecting a vast amount of information regarding public opinion as well as basic (demographic) characteristics of populations (see Babbie, 1973; Fowler, 1984).

Survey questionnaires or interviews enable the researcher to collect a standardized set of data, much of it in quantitative form, from relatively small samples of subjects. Probability sampling techniques enable the researcher to generalize these findings to larger populations. Like experiments, survey research is useful for testing theories and providing explanations.

EXERCISES

For the purpose of these and subsequent exercises in this book, you will need to become familiar with literature illustrating participant observational research. You will find the list of references at the end of the book useful in locating books and articles. Journals publishing the results of participant observation include *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *American Anthropologist*, *American Behavioral Scientist*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Current Anthropology*, *Human Organization*, *Journal of Contemporary*

Ethnography (formerly *Urban Life*), *Qualitative Sociology*, *Social Problems*, *Sociological Quarterly*, and *Symbolic Interaction*.

- Select several illustrations of participant observational research, either monographs or journal articles. Examine and discuss these illustrations in terms of interpretative theorizing, a focus on human meaning and everyday life activities, in-depth case study design, the participant role, and the use of observation and other strategies for collecting information. To what extent do they illustrate these basic features of participant observation? To what extent do they differ with one another?
- Select a journal article or book illustrating (a) a participant observational study, (b) an experiment, and (c) survey research. Identify and discuss similarities and differences among these methodologies. How are they alike or different, specifically, in terms of issues such as problem formation, conceptualization, measurement, sampling, strategies and procedures of data collection, analysis, and theorizing?
- Select one or more illustrations of participant observational research and discuss the ways that this methodology was or was not *appropriate* for the problem, questions, or issues studied. Would it be possible to investigate these issues by way of some other strategy? If so, what might have been the principal differences between these approaches?
- Identify a research problem. Suppose, for instance, that you are interested in the relationship between children's home environments and school adjustment and performance; or perhaps a problem like drug usage among factory workers; or the effectiveness of an alternative school for pregnant teenagers; or a social problem like gambling; or—better yet—supply your own problem. Discuss how participant observation might be used to study this research problem. What are the advantages and disadvantages of participant observation for the investigation of the problem?

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