

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Webb Year 1

their normal everyday environment, rather than questioning them in an artificial interview situation.
By using observational methods rather than questioning people, we might hope to get a truer, more valid picture of social reality.
There are many techniques for observing people. In this Topic, we first look at the main types of observational method before focusing on the one that is used most often by sociologists – namely, participant observation.

we have seen, one problem of using survey methods is that as interviews or questionnaires to study people is that it they say they do and what they *actually* do may be quite different things.
example, in interviews, people may conceal information or about their real behaviour in order to please the interviewer, face or create a better impression of themselves.
a way of overcoming this problem might be simply to for ourselves what people really do by observing them in

Types of observation

There are several different types of observation. Firstly, we distinguish between:

Non-participant observation The researcher simply observes the group or event without taking part in it. For example, they may use a two-way mirror to observe children playing.
Participant observation The researcher actually takes part in an event or the everyday life of the group while observing it.

Secondly, we can distinguish between:

Overt observation The researcher makes their true identity and purpose known to those being studied. The sociologist is open about what they are doing.
Covert observation The study is carried out 'under cover'. The researcher's real identity and purpose are kept concealed from the group being studied. The researcher takes on a false identity and role, usually posing as a genuine member of the group.

However, actual research does not always fit neatly into one other of these categories. For example, William Whyte's (1955) study of 'Street Corner Society' was semi-overt (partly open). He revealed his real purpose to a key member of the group, Doc, but not to others.

Conducting a participant observation study

Sociologists face two main issues when conducting a participant observation study:

getting in, staying in and getting out of the group being studied
whether to use overt or covert observation.

Getting in

To do the study, we must first gain entry to the group. Some groups are easier to enter than others. For example, joining a football crowd is likely to be easier than joining a criminal gang.

Analysis and Evaluation

- 1 Why might a researcher choose to keep their real identity and purpose a secret from the group they are observing?
- 2 In what circumstances, if any, do you think it is acceptable for researchers to do this? Give your reasons.

In sociology, most observation is unstructured participant observation. However, positivist sociologists in particular do occasionally use structured observation, which is normally non-participant. Here, the researcher uses a structured observational schedule to categorise systematically what happens.
The schedule is a pre-determined list of the types of behaviour or situations the sociologist is interested in. Each time an instance of such behaviour occurs, the sociologist records it on the schedule, for example, how often boys and girls in a nursery play with particular toys. The researcher adds up the number of times each event occurs. This produces quantitative data, from which patterns and correlations can then be established. (See page 144 for an example of a structured observational schedule.)
Finally, observation may be used in conjunction with other methods. For example, when interviewing, the researcher may observe interviewees' body language to gauge whether or not they are telling the truth.

making contact

Making the initial contact with the group may depend on personal skills, having the right connections, or even pure chance. Ned Polsky (1971), who was a good pool player himself, found his skill useful in gaining entry to the world of the poolroom hustler. James Patrick (1973) was able to join a Glasgow gang because he looked quite young and knew one of its members from having taught him in approved school (now called young offenders' institutions). Eileen Fairhurst (1977) found herself hospitalised by back trouble and used the opportunity to conduct a study on being a patient.

acceptance

To gain entry to a group, the researcher will have to win their trust and acceptance. It may help to make friends with a key individual, as Sarah Thornton (1995) did with Kate in her study of the clubbing and rave scene. Sometimes, though, the researcher's age, gender, class or ethnicity may prove an obstacle. Thornton found her age and nationality a barrier:

'I began my research when I was 23 and slowly aged out of the peer group I was studying. Also, as a Canadian investigating British clubs and raves, I was quite literally a stranger in a strange land.'

Thornton was met with suspicion at first. As Kate's brother put it, 'How do you know she won't sell this to the Daily Mirror?' However, such barriers can sometimes be overcome. A white researcher, Elliot Liebow (1967), succeeded in gaining acceptance by a black street-corner gang in Washington DC. Some researchers have gone to remarkable lengths to gain acceptance and pass as one of the group, but probably none more so than John Howard Griffin (1962).

Griffin was a white man who in 1959 used medication and sun lamp treatments to change his skin colour and pass as black. He then travelled around the Deep South of the USA, experiencing first hand the impact of white racism. In the Deep South at that time, public amenities such as schools, cafes, hotels, transport and toilets were all racially segregated, and black people faced discrimination in housing, jobs and political and civil rights.

Activity

Webquest

Black Like Me

...go to www.sociology.uk.net

'Getting in' poses the question of what role the researcher should adopt. Ideally, it should:

the observer's role

- be one that does not disrupt the group's normal patterns
- offer a good vantage point from which to make observations.

Whyte succeeded in achieving both these aims by refusing all leadership roles, with the one exception of secretary of the community club, a position that allowed him to take ample notes under the guise of taking the minutes of meetings.

However, it is not always possible to take a role that is both unobtrusive and a good vantage point. Some roles may also involve taking sides in conflicts, with the result that the researcher may become estranged from one faction or the other, making observation more difficult.

Analysis and Evaluation

In what ways might the researcher's personal characteristics be an obstacle to gaining access to a group?

Staying in

Once accepted, the researcher needs to be able to stay in the group and complete the study. Here we can see a key problem for the participant observer: having to be both involved in the group so as to understand it fully, and yet at the same time detached from the group so as to remain objective and unbiased.

'going native'

One danger of staying in the group is that of becoming over-involved or 'going native'. By over-identifying with the group, the researcher becomes biased. When this happens, they have stopped being an objective observer and have simply become a member of the group.

For example, in his study of the Amsterdam police, Maurice Punch (1979) found that in striving to be accepted by the tightly-knit patrol group he was studying, he over-identified with them, even acting as a 'policeman' himself – chasing and holding suspects, searching houses, cars and people, and shouting at people who abused his police 'colleagues'. At the other extreme, the researcher may preserve their detachment so as to avoid bias, but by remaining detached they risk not understanding the events they observe.

Striking a balance between these two extremes is immensely difficult. As David Downes and Paul Rock (2011) put it: 'Participant-observers try to perform a most intricate unattainable state of one who is both insider and outsider, a person who sees a social world from within in the manner of a member, yet who also stands apart and analyses it in the manner of a stranger.'

Punch had done his research with later told him, "When you were with us, we only let you see what we wanted you to see";

- It risks creating the Hawthorne Effect, where those who know they are being observed begin to behave differently as a result. This undermines the validity of the data.

Covert observation

Because of these disadvantages, some sociologists choose to carry out covert observation. However, the use of covert observation raises several practical and ethical issues.

Practical issues

The main practical advantage of covert observation is that it reduces the risk of altering people's behaviour, and sometimes it is the only way to obtain valid information. This is particularly true where people are engaged in activities that they would rather keep secret. As Laud Humphreys (1970), who studied gay men's sexual encounters in public toilets, notes:

'There is only one way to watch highly discreditable behaviour and that is to pretend to be in the same boat with those engaging in it.'

If they knew they were being observed, they would change or conceal their behaviour and so the main advantage of observation – that it preserves the naturalness of people's behaviour – would be lost.

On the other hand, covert participant observation can pose practical problems.

Firstly, it requires the researcher to keep up an act, and may call for detailed knowledge of the group's way of life even before joining it. There is always a risk of one's cover being 'blown' by even a trivial mistake. Patrick was almost found out when he bought his suit with cash instead of credit and when he fastened the middle button of his jacket rather than the top one – things the gang would never have done. This is likely to bring the research to an abrupt end and may, in the case of some criminal groups, lead to physical harm. As Polsky advises, therefore:

'You damned well better not pretend to be "one of them" because they will test this claim out and you will either find yourself involved in illegal activities, or your cover will be blown.'

This was something Patrick also discovered when the gang handed him an axe to use in an expected fight.

Secondly, the sociologist cannot usually take notes openly and must rely on memory and the opportunity to write them in secret. Both Leon Festinger et al (1956), studying a religious sect that had predicted the imminent end of the world, and Jason Ditton (1977), studying theft among bread deliverymen, had to use toilets as a place for

Getting out

A further problem of staying in is that the more time the researcher spends with the group, the less strange it may come to appear. After a while, the researcher may cease to notice things that would have struck them as unusual or noteworthy at an earlier stage of the research: the observer becomes less observant. As Whyte put it, 'I started as a non-participating observer and ended as a non-observing participant'.

In practical terms, getting out of the group at the end of the study generally presents fewer problems than getting in or staying in. If the worst comes to the worst, the researcher can simply call a halt and leave. This was Patrick's experience of studying a Glasgow gang when, sickened by the violence, he abandoned the study abruptly. Others can leave more gracefully, particularly if their observation has been overt. Nevertheless, leaving a group with whom one has become close can be difficult.

Re-entering one's normal world can also be difficult. Whyte found that when he returned to Harvard University after his research, he was tongue-tied and unable to communicate with fellow academics. These problems can be made worse if the research is conducted on and off over a period of time, with multiple 'crossings' between the two worlds. The researcher may also find that loyalty prevents them from fully disclosing everything they have learnt, for fear that this might harm members of the group. For example, in the case of criminal groups, exposure of their activities might lead to prosecution, or reprisals against the author. Clearly, such concealment of data will reduce the validity of the study.

Overt observation

Sociologists face the decision whether to use overt or covert observation. Many sociologists favour the use of overt observation, where the researcher reveals his or her true identity and purpose to the group and asks their permission to observe. This has several advantages:

- It avoids the ethical (moral) problem of obtaining information by deceit and, when studying deviant groups, that of being expected to join in their activities.
- It allows the observer to ask the kind of naive but important questions that only an outsider could ask. For example, the researcher could ask a gang member, 'Why do you rob and steal?'
- The observer can take notes openly.
- It allows the researcher to use interview methods to check insights derived from observations.

However, overt observation has two major disadvantages:

- A group may refuse the researcher permission to observe them, or may prevent them from seeing everything. As two of the Amsterdam police officers that

recording their observations. In Ditton's case, this eventually aroused suspicion.

Thirdly, the researcher cannot ask naive but important questions, or combine observation with other methods, such as interviews.

Fourthly, although pretending to be an insider rather than an outsider reduces the risk of the Hawthorne Effect, the addition of a new member (the researcher) can still change the group's behaviour, thus reducing validity.

Ethical issues

Covert participant observation raises serious ethical (moral) issues for researchers. These often conflict with the practical advantage it brings of observing natural behaviour.

- It is immoral to deceive people, obtaining information by pretending to be their friend or 'in the same boat'. Researchers should obtain the informed consent of their subjects, and reveal the purpose of the study and the use to which its findings will be put. With covert observation, this cannot normally be done, at least until afterwards.
- Covert observers may have to lie about their reasons for leaving the group at the end of their research. Others, such as Patrick, simply abandon the group without explanation. Critics argue that this is unethical.
- They may have to participate in immoral or illegal activities as part of their 'cover' role.
- Similarly, as witnesses to such activities, they may have a moral or legal duty to intervene or to report them to the police.

Advantages of participant observation

According to its supporters, participant observation offers a range of advantages.

1 Validity

What people say they do when asked in a questionnaire, and what they actually do in real life, are not always the same thing. By contrast, by actually observing people we can obtain rich qualitative data that provides a picture of how they really live. Supporters of participant observation argue that this is the method's main strength, and most of its other advantages are linked to this.

2 Insight

The best way to truly understand what something is like is to experience it for ourselves. Sociologists call this personal

Box 23 Positivism, interpretivism and observation

Interpretivists favour *unstructured participant* observation because it achieves their main goal of validity:

- Observation gives the researcher a true picture because it shows us what people do, rather than simply what they say they do.
- Participation in the group gives the researcher first hand insight into social actors' meanings and behaviour – especially if the observation is carried out covertly.

Positivists reject participant observation because its lack of structure means it cannot be replicated or results quantified. Positivists favour *structured non-participant* observation because it achieves their main goals of reliability, generalisability and representativeness:

- Standardised behaviour categories produce reliable data because other researchers can replicate the observation.
 - Pre-determined observational categories allow us to produce quantitative data, identify and measure behaviour patterns, and establish cause-and-effect relationships.
 - Structured observation takes less time than unstructured observation, so a larger, more representative sample can be studied.
- Interpretivists reject structured observation because it imposes the researcher's view of reality on those being observed, resulting in invalid data.

See Box 12 on page 94 for more about positivism, interpretivism and research methods.

3 Flexibility

As we saw in Topics 4 and 5, research methods such as questionnaires and structured interviews involve

Participant observation allows the researcher to gain empathy through personal experience. By actually living as a member of a group, we can gain insight into their way of life, their meanings and viewpoints, their values and problems. We can come to understand their 'life-world' as they themselves understand it. This closeness to people's lived reality means that participant observation can give uniquely valid, authentic data.

or subjective understanding 'verstehen', a German word meaning 'empathy', or understanding that comes from putting yourself in another person's place.

4 Practical advantages

Sometimes participant observation may be the only viable method for studying certain groups, particularly those engaged in activities that wider society sees as deviant or disreputable. Such groups are likely to be suspicious of outsiders who come asking questions. As Lewis Yablonsky (1973) points out, a teenage gang is likely to see researchers who come armed with questionnaires as the unwelcome representatives of authority.

By contrast, because participant observation enables the sociologist to build a rapport with the group and gain its trust, it has proved a successful method of studying delinquent gangs, football hooligans, thieves, drug users, religious sects and other 'outsider' groups.

Participant observation can also be used in other situations where questioning would be ineffective. This is shown in Aaron Cicourel's (1968) study of how police and probation officers categorise juveniles by making unconscious assumptions about whether they are criminal 'types'. Precisely because they are unaware of their assumptions, it would be pointless for the sociologist to ask them questions about these. For Cicourel, therefore, the only way to get at these assumptions is to observe the police directly in their work.

Disadvantages of participant observation

Despite the advantages offered by participant observation, it also faces a number of disadvantages.

1 Practical disadvantages

There are several practical disadvantages in using participant observation:

- It is very time-consuming. For example, Whyte's study took him four years to complete.
- The researcher needs to be trained so as to be able to recognise aspects of a situation that are sociologically significant and worth further attention.
- It can be personally stressful and demanding, especially if covert.
- It requires observational and interpersonal skills that not everyone possesses.

- Personal characteristics such as age, gender or ethnicity may restrict what kinds of groups can be studied. As Downes and Rock put it, 'not everyone would pass uneventfully into the world of punk rockers or Hell's Angels'.
- Many groups may not wish to be studied in this way, and some have the power to make access difficult. This is one reason why participant observation often focuses on relatively powerless groups who are less able to resist being studied, such as petty criminals.

2 Ethical problems

As we have seen, covert participant observation in particular raises serious ethical difficulties, including deceiving people in order to obtain information about them and participating in illegal or immoral activities in the course of sociological research.

3 Representativeness

Sociologists who use quantitative survey methods usually study large, carefully selected, representative samples that provide a sound basis for making generalisations. By contrast, in participant observation studies, the group studied is usually very small and the 'sample' is often selected haphazardly, for example by a chance encounter with someone who turns out to be a key informant.

This does not provide a sound basis for making generalisations. As Downes and Rock note, although participant observation may provide valid insights into

Analysis and Evaluation
Why is covert participant observation more likely than overt to be stressful and demanding for the researcher?

the particular group being studied, it is doubtful how far these 'internally valid' insights are 'externally valid', that is, generalisable to the wider population.

4 Reliability

Reliability means that if another researcher repeats the method, they will obtain the same results. To achieve reliability, research procedures must be standardised so that other researchers can reproduce them. For example, in structured interviews all interviewers ask the same standard questions in the same way.

By contrast, in participant observation so much depends on the personal skills and characteristics of a lone researcher that it is unlikely any other investigator would be able to replicate the original study. For example, as Whyte recognised, his method was to some extent unique to him alone.

Also, because participant observation usually produces qualitative data, this can make comparisons with other studies difficult. As a result, it is unlikely to produce reliable data. Positivists, who see sociology as scientific, thus reject participant observation as an unsystematic method that cannot be replicated by other researchers.

5 Bias and lack of objectivity

Critics argue that participant observation studies lack objectivity.

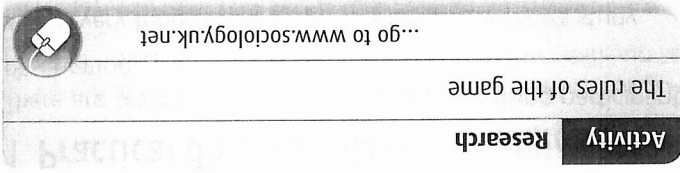
- The risk of becoming too involved and 'going native' makes it difficult to remain objective and the sociologist may end up presenting a one-sided or biased view of the group.
- Sometimes, loyalty to the group or fear of reprisals leads the sociologist to conceal sensitive information. This denies those who read the published study a full and objective account of the research.
- Participant observation often attracts sociologists whose sympathies lie with the underdog. Since it is seen as an effective method for 'telling it like it is' from the actor's point of view, some of those who use it may be biased in favour of their subjects' viewpoint. For example, Willis was accused of presenting a romanticised account of the 'lads'.

6 Validity

According to its supporters, the great strength of participant observation lies in its validity. As a form of verstehen, allowing the sociologist to become an insider, it gives an authentic account of the actor's world.

Positivists reject this claim. They argue that the findings from such studies are merely the subjective and biased impressions of the observer. Rather than truly 'telling it like it is', participant observation simply tells it as the observer sees it.

Topic summary



However, structural sociologists such as Marxists and functionalists see this as inadequate. They argue that because it focuses on the 'micro' level of actors' meanings, participant observation research tends to ignore the wider structural forces that shape our behaviour, such as class inequality or the norms and values into which we are socialised.

Interactionists favour the use of participant observation. They see society as constructed through the small-scale, face-to-face interactions of its members and the meanings that individual actors give to their situation. In their view, participant observation is a useful tool for examining these micro-level interactions and meanings at first hand.

7 Lack of a concept of structure

A further threat to validity comes from the Hawthorne Effect: the very presence of the observer may make the subjects act differently. This defeats the main aim of participant observation, to produce a 'naturalistic' account of human behaviour.

Supporters of participant observation claim that it does not impose the sociologists' own categories and ideas on the facts, but positivists argue that in reality the researcher selects what facts they think are worth recording, and that these are likely to fit in with the researcher's pre-existing views and prejudices.

Participant observation (PO) involves joining in with a group to gain insight, and can be overt or covert. Research goes through three phases: getting in, staying in and getting out. Covert PO may produce more valid data, but is ethically questionable and faces practical problems of maintaining one's cover. Interpretivists claim that PO produces valid data, but positivists argue that it is unreliable, unrepresentative and lacks objectivity. They prefer structured observation, which is usually non-participant and collects quantitative data.