

Participant observation

Participant observation involves a researcher actually joining the group or community she or he is studying, and participating in its activities over a period of time. The researcher tries to become an accepted part of the group to see the world the way members of the group do. For example, American sociologist Venkatesh (2009) spent eighteen months, spread over a period of seven years, participating in the life of a Chicago crack-dealing gang (the 'Black Kings'), as part of his work on poverty in the United States. Through his participation, Venkatesh was able to gain insights into the lives of drug-dealing gang members, crackheads, squatters, prostitutes, pimps, police officers and others linked to the crack-selling business.

THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT OF PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Participant observation is typically used by interpretivists to develop an understanding of the world from the point of view of the subjects of the research. Interpretivists argue that a sociological understanding of society can only be gained by understanding people's meanings. They suggest the most effective way of doing this is for researchers to put themselves in the same position as those they are studying. The idea is to get 'inside' people's heads to see the world as they do and how they make sense of it. Rather than testing hypotheses against evidence and searching for the causes of social events, *verstehen* (an understanding developed through empathy or close identification) and qualitative research are what sociology should be about.

The problem for interpretivists who choose participant observation is not the positivist concern with scientific detachment, but how to become involved enough to understand what is going on as seen through the eyes of group members, and to avoid letting the researcher's own values and prejudices distort the observations.

THE STAGES OF PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND RELATED PROBLEMS

The stages of participant observation can be summed up in terms of *getting in*, *staying in* and *getting out* of the group concerned. These stages, and the success of participant observation in general, rely a great deal on the personality and personal skills of the researcher, as they have to be adaptable enough to be accepted into the group and get on with group members.

Getting in

Joining a group raises many questions about the researcher's role. The researcher may adopt an **overt role** whereby the researcher declares his or her true identity to the group and the fact he or she is doing research. Alternatively, the researcher may adopt a **covert role** (concealing his or her role as a researcher), or a *cover story* (partially declaring his or her role as a researcher, but concealing elements of it). To participate successfully, particularly if adopting a covert role, the researcher would need to share some of the personal characteristics of the group, such as age, gender or ethnicity.

A covert role A covert role is likely to be adopted when criminal or deviant activities or lifestyles are involved, when overt researchers may be seen as a threat and unwelcome, as in the research by Humphreys on gay men in *The Tea Room Trade* (1970). The researcher who called himself 'James Patrick' (not his real name) in *A Glasgow Gang Observed* (1973) had to keep even his name secret, as he feared for his personal safety when studying violent gangs in Glasgow. A covert role may also be adopted where there is a risk of people's behaviour changing if they know they are being studied.

If a covert role is to be adopted and maintained, the researcher has little choice but to become a full participant in the group, because there is a risk of the research being ruined if the covert researcher's real identity and purpose are discovered. This may involve participation in illegal or

An **overt role** is one whereby the researcher reveals to the group being studied his or her true identity and purpose.

A **covert role** is one where the researcher conceals from the group being studied his or her true identity as a researcher, to gain access to the group and avoid disrupting its normal behaviour.

unpleasant activities. It is also difficult to ask questions and take notes without arousing suspicion, and there are also moral and ethical concerns over observing and reporting on people's activities in secret, deceiving them and not obtaining their consent first.

An overt role Adopting an overt role has the advantage that things might be hidden from a member of a group in a way that they might not be from a trusted and known outsider – since she or he will have nothing to gain in the group. The openness and honesty of the researcher about what she or he is doing may itself encourage and build trust with group members. Other advantages are that the researcher may be able to ask questions or interview people, take notes, and avoid participation in illegal or immoral behaviour, without arousing suspicion. Ethically and morally, it is right that people should be aware they are being studied, and able to give their informed consent.

Adopting an overt role does have problems though. For example, there is always the possibility that the behaviour of those being studied may be affected, raising questions over the validity of the research. As Whyte admitted in *Street Corner Society* (1955), quoting the gang leader 'Doc': 'You've slowed me up plenty since you've been down here. Now when I want to do something, I have to think what Bill Whyte would want me to know about it and how I can explain it . . . Before I used to do things by instinct.'

After deciding the nature of the role, the next problem is getting access to the group. The presence of a stranger needs explanation, and researchers need to establish 'bona fide' credentials for getting access to the group. This may involve gaining friendships with key individuals. For example, Whyte was able to do his research because of his contacts with the gang leader 'Doc', and Patrick knew a gang member called 'Tim', who was able to get him into the gang and provide some protection for him. Venkatesh befriended a gang leader named 'JT', who provided him with protection as he documented what he saw in the dangerous world of crack-dealing.

Participant observation in some contexts may require permission from higher authorities. This may mean the researcher is identified with authority, which may affect the behaviour of those being observed. For example, participant observation by an adult of students in a school will require the permission of the headteacher. This may mean the researcher is identified with the staff rather than the students. Willis required permission to carry out his research in a secondary school in Wolverhampton, and on occasion found that the teachers expected him to take responsibility for disciplining the students, undermining his participant observer role.

Staying in

The observer has to develop a role which will involve gaining the trust and cooperation of those observed, to enable continued participation in and observation of the group. Initially this will involve learning, listening and getting a sense of what's going on: 'Initially, keep your eyes and ears open but keep your mouth shut' was Doc's advice to Whyte in *Street Corner Society*.

Problems of staying in the group involve issues such as the need for extensive note-taking, which may be disruptive of the behaviour of the group, and how far to involve yourself without either losing the trust of the group or the objectivity of a researcher. Maintaining the trust of the group may involve getting involved with acts that the researcher doesn't agree with. Barker (1984), for example, gave a talk to the Moonies which reinforced the beliefs of one Moonie, despite Barker's protests that she didn't believe a word of what she had said. Staying in might also involve the observer with unpleasant acts or people, and possibly criminal behaviour. For example, Whyte actually did some 'personating' – illegally voting twice in an election – as this was common practice in the group he was studying, and Venkatesh colluded in gang violence, when he took part in beating up the boyfriend of an abused teenager.

Getting out

Getting out of the group involves issues such as leaving the group without damaging relationships, becoming sufficiently detached to write an impartial and accurate account, and making sure members of the group cannot be identified. There may be possible reprisals against the researcher if criminal activities are involved. When Patrick's research on a Glasgow gang, using a covert role, was finally published, he faced threats to his personal safety.

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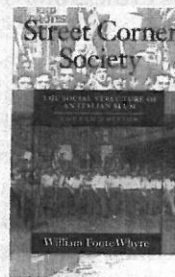
Activity

Refer to the five participant observation studies by Whyte, Humphreys, Patrick, Barker and Venkatesh in the box below

- 1 Suggest ways that the personal characteristics of the researcher may have been important in enabling him or her in each case to do the research.
- 2 What problems might there be in generalizing the findings of such studies to other similar social groups?
- 3 Suggest any difficulties you think the researchers might have found in each study in:
 - getting into the group
 - staying in the group
 - getting out of the group without damaging personal relationships
- 4 Write about one side of A4 paper on any (a) ethical difficulties and (b) problems of validity you think there might have been with any of these examples of research.

Five classic studies of participant observation research**William Foote Whyte, *Street Corner Society* (1955)**

This is a study of an Italian-American street corner gang in Boston in the United States. Whyte spent three and a half years in the area as a participant observer, including living in an Italian house with the group he was studying, and he became a member of the gang.

**Laud Humphreys, *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places* (1970)**

Humphreys wanted to study the gay subculture, and observed the sexual activity of gay men in ninety public toilets (the 'tearooms') in American cities in the 1960s. He initially adopted a covert role as a 'gay voyeur' (someone who liked watching sex between men) and 'watch-queen' – a lookout for other men in case of police interference. Humphreys became an accepted part of the gay scene in Chicago, through visiting gay bars and other parts of the gay scene. Adopting a more overt role, he also interviewed some men. Humphreys noted the car numbers of many gay men who used the 'tearooms' and, through police contacts, was able to get their addresses and background information for interview research a year later as part of a health survey. Humphreys had to disguise his appearance during this survey so he wouldn't be recognized by men he had met.

James Patrick, *A Glasgow Gang Observed* (1973)

James Patrick used a covert role to study a violent and delinquent teenage Glasgow gang over a period of four months between October 1966 and January 1967.

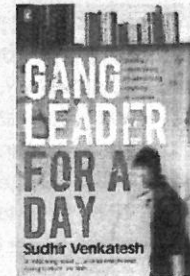


Eileen Barker, *The Making of a Moonie* (1984)

This is a study of members of the Unification Church, a controversial religious sect headed by the Revd Moon. Barker used overt participant observation over a period of six years, accepting the risk that this could mean the people she was studying could be affected by her presence.

**Sudhir Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Crosses the Line* (2009)**

Venkatesh spent eighteen months, spread over seven years, participating in the life of the Black Kings – a Chicago crack-dealing gang – adopting an overt role. He lived with gang members, and slept on the couches and floors of people's apartments and of crack dens to gain insights into life in a poverty-stricken community. He observed much illegal and violent behaviour during his periods of participation.

**ADVANTAGES AND STRENGTHS OF PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION**

- The sociologist gains first-hand knowledge of the group being studied. By building a relationship of trust, more in-depth, valid data can be obtained than by other research techniques. It is the method least likely to impose the sociologist's own views on the group being studied, therefore providing a more valid understanding of a social group.
- It allows hypotheses and theories to emerge from the research as it goes along. This enables the researcher to discover things she or he may not even have thought about before. As Whyte noted in *Street Corner Society*, 'As I sat and listened, I learned the answers to questions that I would not even have had the sense to ask if I had been getting my information solely on an interviewing basis.'
- It is the best way to get at the meanings that a social activity has for those involved in it, through seeing the world through the eyes of members of the group.
- It may be the only possible method of research. For example, criminal and other deviant activities may be very difficult to investigate using other methods like interviews and questionnaires.
- People can be studied in their normal social situation over a period of time, rather than in the rather artificial and 'snapshot' context of a questionnaire or interview.
- There is less of a chance that the people being studied can mislead the researcher than there is using other methods. This might therefore produce more valid data.

DISADVANTAGES AND PROBLEMS OF PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

- Positivists argue there are problems with the validity and reliability of participant observation studies. For example, there is no real way of checking the findings as there is no real evidence apart from the observations and interpretations of the researcher. What one researcher might regard as important may be missed or seen as unimportant by another. Even direct quotations from group members are often written down later, and may be only partially recalled – the researcher may remember what she or he *thought* was said. Rather than scientific detachment between the researcher and those being researched, positivists claim the method depends too heavily on the personal characteristics and personality of the researcher, creating in-built bias and making it almost impossible to check the findings of participant observation studies.

- The presence of a researcher, if she or he is known to the group, may in some ways change the group's behaviour simply because they know they are being studied. This *Hawthorne effect* may lead to problems for the validity of the research. For example, Whyte admits in *Street Corner Society* that knowledge of his presence and intentions may well have changed the behaviour of the gang.
- There is a danger of the researcher becoming so involved with the group, seeing the world only as the group does, and developing such loyalty to it, that she or he may find it difficult to stand back and report findings in a neutral way. 'Going native' – becoming so involved that all detachment is lost – is a possible problem. The researcher may then stop being a participant observer and become a non-observing participant.
- It is very time-consuming and expensive compared to other methods, as it involves the researcher being physically present in the group for long periods.
- Because only a small group is studied, it may not be representative, so it is difficult to make generalizations.
- There may be ethical issues if people do not know they are being observed, and therefore will not have the opportunity to give their informed consent to the research. Ethical issues also arise if knowledge is gained, during research, of activities harmful to others, and the researcher then faces the quandary of what course of action to follow. Telling the authorities might damage continuation of the research, but not telling them might cause harm to others. Venkatesh tried to overcome this by avoiding situations where he might overhear the planning of criminal activity so he then wouldn't have to report it to the police.
- In personal terms, such research may be difficult for the researcher – for example, mixing with people they would rather not be with, getting involved in distasteful or illegal activities (in order to fit in) or even facing personal danger – as Patrick did in *A Glasgow Gang Observed*. Humphreys was actually arrested during his research on gays. Venkatesh had a gun put to his head and was kept captive for 24 hours because the crack-dealing gang initially thought he was a rival gang member. As well as illegal drug dealing, Venkatesh also witnessed a lot of beatings,

Activity

'Of course it was known that I was not a Moonie. I never pretended that I was, or that I was likely to become one. I admit that I was sometimes evasive, and I certainly did not always say everything that was on my mind, but I cannot remember any occasion on which I consciously lied to a Moonie. Being known as a non-member had its disadvantages, but by talking to people who had left the movement I was able to check that I was not missing any of the internal information which was available to rank-and-file members. At the same time, being an outsider who was "inside" had enormous advantages. I was allowed (even, on certain occasions, expected) to ask questions that no member would have presumed to ask either his leaders or his peers. Furthermore, several Moonies who felt that their problems were not understood by the leaders, and yet would not have dreamed of being disloyal to the movement by talking to their parents or other outsiders, could confide in me because of the very fact that I was both organisationally and emotionally uninvolved.'

(Barker (1984))

- 1 With reference to the passage above, explain in your own words the advantages Barker found in adopting an overt role.
- 2 What ethical problems are involved in Barker's admission that she was 'sometimes evasive'?
- 3 Barker says, 'Being known as a non-member had its disadvantages.' What disadvantages do you think she might have come across (either read the research, or think and guess!).
- 4 Do you consider there are any circumstances in which adopting a covert role in research might be justified? Explain your answer.
- 5 Humphreys took car numbers of gay men who used public toilets to obtain gay sex and, through police contacts, was able to get their addresses and background information for interview research a year later as part of a health survey. What ethical difficulties do you think this poses?

drive-by shootings and other episodes of violence. His overt role and protection by the gang members and the wider community enabled him to avoid actively participating in such criminality, but he himself admitted that simply observing such activity was very unpleasant.

RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY IN PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Positivists tend to be critical of participant observation because they argue the data obtained are rarely quantified and are unreliable. Participant observation depends heavily on the sensitivity, skills, personality and personal characteristics of the observer, and this makes it very difficult to replicate a participant observation study in order to check the findings. As Whyte said in *Street Corner Society*: 'To some extent my approach must be unique to myself, to the particular situation, and to the state of knowledge existing when I began research.'

Participant observation is always to some extent selective observation – the researcher's interpretation of the significant and important things happening in a group. What one participant observer reports or interprets as significant may not be seen as such by another. Positivists would ask how interpretivists can prove they have interpreted the attitudes and experiences of others correctly. Participant observers use devices like extensive note-taking to accumulate evidence to help to ensure that their research is reliable as well as valid and can be checked by others. Other sociologists are, though, ultimately left to rely on the memory, observational and interpretive skills of the researcher, and this raises problems for the validity and reliability of the research that are difficult to resolve.

Non-participant observation

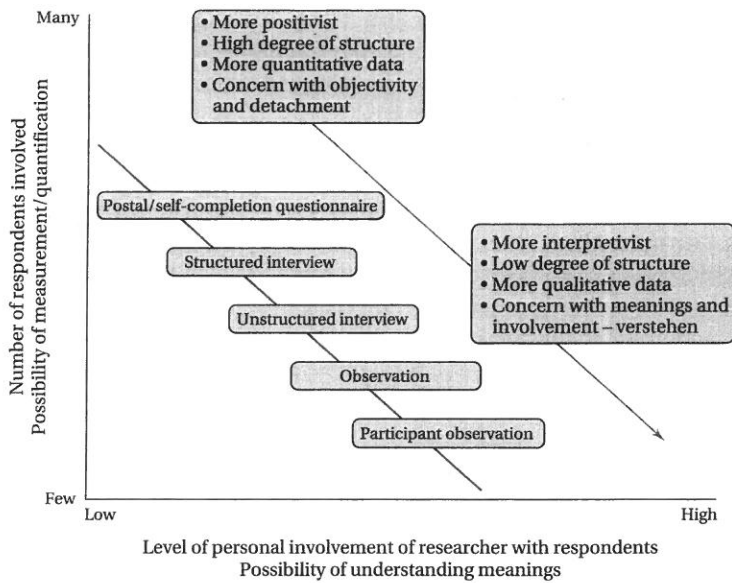
Some sociological research is carried out by observation alone (without the researcher participating). The main reason for this is to reduce or eliminate the risk that people will be affected by the presence of a researcher or new member of their social group. It may also be used when groups might be unwilling to cooperate in research (though this raises ethical issues). Non-participant observation also allows sociologists to observe people in their normal social situations, and avoid the Hawthorne effect. This can only be achieved fully when the observation is carried out without the knowledge of the observed, for example from a distance, by blending

Activity

- 1 Identify and explain two criticisms positivists might make of participant observation as a research method.
- 2 Identify and explain two reasons why interpretivists might argue that participant observation is the most effective method of understanding and explaining social life.
- 3 Suggest two reasons sociologists who employ participant observation might give to claim their work is as 'scientific' as any positivist research.
- 4 Suggest three ways that the social characteristics of the researcher might make it difficult to conduct participant observation in a primary or secondary school classroom.
- 5 With examples, explain the advantages of adopting (a) a covert role and (b) an overt role in participant observation.
- 6 What are the ethical and moral issues which make participant observation difficult, particularly if using a covert role?
- 7 Explain what is meant by the risk in participant observation that 'the researcher may stop being a participant observer and become a non-observing participant'.
- 8 Look at the weaknesses and disadvantages of participant observation listed earlier. Suggest ways that a skilled participant observer might be able to overcome the problems identified.
- 9 Much participant observation research has been done on deviant groups. Suggest reasons why this might be the case.

into the background, through one-way glass or using video cameras. If the observer is visibly present, even though not participating, there is still the possibility that his or her presence will influence what is happening.

A problem with this method is that it does not allow the researcher to investigate the meanings people attach to the behaviour that is being observed. The data produced may well reflect simply the assumptions and interpretations of the researcher, raising serious issues over the reliability and validity of the data.



Activity

Refer to figure 3.9

- 1 According to figure 3.9, which method of data collection involves the largest number of respondents?
- 2 Which method has the highest level of personal involvement of the researcher with the respondents?
- 3 Which method, apart from observational methods, provides the most qualitative data?
- 4 What method is most likely to be used by interpretivists?
- 5 Identify *three* advantages and *three* problems with research using postal or other self-completion questionnaires involving large numbers of individuals.
- 6 Identify and explain *three* difficulties that might face researchers who have a high level of personal involvement with those they are researching.

Longitudinal studies

Most sociological researchers study a group of people for a short period of time, producing a snapshot of events. It is therefore difficult to study change over time.

The longitudinal study attempts to overcome this problem by selecting a sample – sometimes called a ‘panel’ or ‘cohort’ – from whom data are collected by repeated surveys at regular intervals over a period of years. Each of these surveys is sometimes referred to as a ‘wave’ or ‘sweep’. This enables the collection of data on the same group of people, which can be developed and compared from one survey to the next, showing change over time.