

Sociology Shortcuts

M4b. Interpretivist Methods

A second aspect here is the extensive use of different types of **Observational study**.

1. Non-Participant Observation

One of the few research methods shared with their positivist counterparts, this involves watching behaviour *from a distance* - sometimes literally, when the research subject doesn't know they're being observed, but more-usually in the sense the researcher doesn't become *personally involved* in the behaviour they're studying.

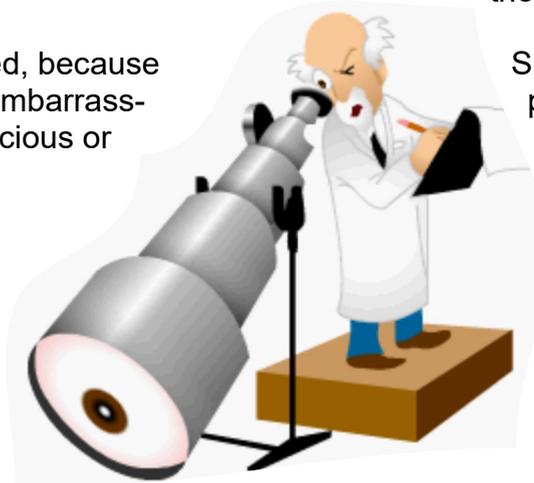
Strengths

The ability to stay **detached** from and **not interacting** with the people being studied can be useful in some circumstances. By **covertly (secretly) observing** people we get an insight into how they "actually behave" in their everyday lives. **Yule** (1986), for example, used this technique when she wanted to discover how mothers *really* treated their children in public places.

Data validity is potentially higher using this technique because it can reveal patterns of behaviour obscured by other methods. For example, in their study of gambling **Parke and Griffiths** (2002) argued they couldn't simply ask gamblers about their behaviour because gamblers "may be dishonest about the extent of their gambling activities to researchers as well as to those close to them".

This study reveals two further strengths of this method - the researcher can get **access** to study people who:

- May not want to be studied, because their behaviour is illegal or embarrassing. They may also be suspicious or wary of a researcher.
- Are observed in a natural setting: The researcher gets to see "everyday behaviour" as, when and how it occurs.



Weaknesses

Observational studies can't be easily or exactly **replicated** and this affects **data reliability**. The researcher **lacks control** over the composition of a group, which may also change over time.

Parke and Griffiths (2008)

Found "*the art of being inconspicuous*" was an important researcher **skill**:
"If the researcher fails to blend in, then slot machine gamblers soon realise they are being watched and are therefore highly likely to change their behaviour. Some players get nervous, perhaps agitated and stop playing. Others do the opposite and try to show off by exaggerating their playing ritual. Blending into the setting depends upon a number of factors, including whether the venue is crowded and easy to wander around in without looking suspicious".

Is it **ethical** to follow and observe people without their permission?

Similarly, Is it **ethical** to observe people who have expressly declined to be observed?

Watching people "from a distance" may simple result in **trivial observations**: data that fails to capture the depth and richness of their behaviour.

2. Participant Observation

This method is used extensively in Interpretivist research and has two main forms.

a. Overt Participant Observation

The researcher joins a group openly and its members know they are being observed - although they may not always know the exact purpose and scope of the research.

Strengths

Recording data is relatively easy because the group knows and understands the role of the researcher. The researcher can ask questions, take notes, etc. without raising suspicions.

In groups with *hierarchical structures* (such as a school) the researcher gets **access** to all levels (the staffroom *and* the classroom).

Sponsorship is commonly-used to gain entry to a group: the researcher gains the trust and cooperation of a powerful group member. **Venkatesh's** (2009) study of a Black American gang was made possible by "JT", a middle-ranking gang member, vouching for him. This gave **Venkatesh** access to different levels of the gang.

It is *easier* to **separate the roles** of participant and observer and reduces the chance of the researcher **going native** - becoming so involved in a group they stop observing and simply become a participant.

The ability to ask questions, observe behaviour and experience the day-to-day life of respondents helps the researcher build a highly-detailed picture of the lives they're describing. This **"360 degree" view** means the researcher not only gets to understand what people "say they do", they also witness and experience what people *actually* do - which all adds to potential **validity**.

Where the observer's role is open and clearly defined there is less risk of involvement in **unethical**, criminal, dangerous or destructive behaviours. The researcher can withdraw from unethical or risky situations without losing the trust or arousing the suspicions of the people they are researching.

Weaknesses

The **observer effect** refers to the unknown ways a researcher's presence changes how people - consciously or subconsciously - behave. In other words, the mere presence of a researcher may invalidate part or all of the data they collect.

A further observer effect noted by **Venkatesh** involved showboating: participants "put on a show" for the benefit of the observer. In this instance, the researcher becomes **over-involved** in the group; their presence becomes the *focal point* around which people orientate their behaviour. The danger here is that the researcher "becomes the story" they are supposedly observing.

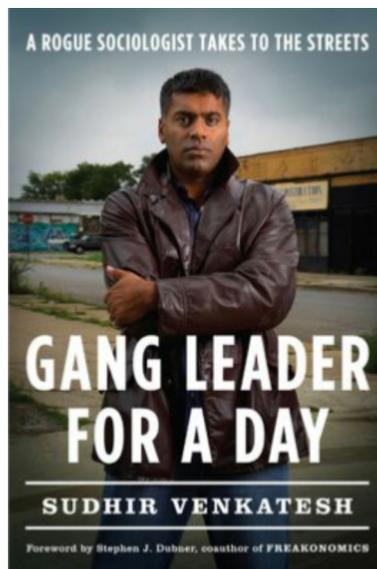
On the other hand, if the researcher doesn't **fully participate** in the group, their involvement may be *too superficial* to fully experience the world from the viewpoint of those being studied.

Depth of involvement may be limited by **ethical** considerations - not participating in criminal behaviour, for example - that may affect the extent to which the researcher is truly experiencing how people "normally behave".

This type of research is impossible to **replicate** and we must **trust** the researcher saw and experienced the behaviour they document. **Reliability** is further weakened by the problem of accurately recording behaviour. No researcher can record and document *everything* that happens and all research involves the **selection** and **interpretation** of ideas and events.

While openness can be a strength, if a group **refuses the researcher permission** to observe the research can't be done.

This method involves huge amounts of **effort**, **time** and **money**; a researcher must, after all, live while doing the research - **Venkatesh** spent 8 years on his study of a single gang in a small area of one American city.



b. Covert Participant Observation

The researcher joins the group secretly and those being observed are unaware they are being studied. The main objective here is to observe behaviour in its "natural setting".

Strengths

It may be the only way to study people who would not normally allow themselves to be researched.

The **level of participation** is very high: the researcher may live, work and socialise with the people they're studying and this method produces detailed, insightful, personally experienced, data that is likely to be a highly-**valid** insight into the meanings, motivations and relationships within a group.

By experiencing things from the viewpoint of those involved (**verstehen**) a researcher can make sense of behaviour even where group members may not fully understand - or be able to articulate - the reasons for their behaviour.

Parke and Griffiths (2008)

They note that in some situations it's possible to overestimate "*the subject's knowledge and understanding of their own behaviour*" - and hence their ability to explain why they do something in an **interview** or **questionnaire**.

As they argued "*We have observed that many slot machine gamblers claim to understand how slot machines work when in fact they know very little. This appears to be a face-saving mechanism so that they do not appear ignorant*".

In addition, when a researcher analyses behaviour "from the outside, looking in" it can be difficult to explain why people would want to behave in ways we may find distasteful, disgusting or perverse - covert observation goes some way to resolving this problem by allowing the researcher to understand the **meaning** behind people's actions because they experience such things for themselves.

Possible **observer effects** are avoided because people are unaware they are being watched: their behaviour is *largely unaffected* by the researcher's presence.

Criminal or deviant groups

Ward (2008) "was a member of the rave dance drugs culture" when she began her 5-year study "in London nightclubs, dance parties, bars and pubs and people's houses [where]...the social interactions and processes at the heart of rave dance drugs exchange were observed".

Closed groups

Lofland and Stark (1965) secretly studied the behaviour of a religious sect because this was the only way to gain access to the group.

Anonymous groups

Ray (1987) covertly studied Australian environmentalist groups in order to "*minimize defensiveness on the part of those studied and to avoid breakdowns in co-operation*".

Weaknesses

Goffman's (1961) study of an American mental institution identified *three major problems* for the covert participant observer:

1. Getting In

While gaining **covert entry** to *any* group can be problematic, some groups are *more difficult* to enter than others:

- If the **characteristics** of the researcher (such as age, gender or ethnicity) don't match those of the group the researcher won't be able to gain access. A man, for example, could not covertly study a group of nuns.
- Entry to some **closed groups** (such as Freemasons) is by invite only. Unless the researcher is invited, they cannot join...
- Some groups have **entry requirements**. To covertly study accountants or doctors, for example, the researcher would need to hold the qualifications required to practice these professions.

A further problem can be **access** to different areas of a group, particularly *hierarchical* groups. A covert researcher posing as a student in a school would not have access to areas reserved for teachers.

Parke and Griffiths (2008) argue "It's impossible to study everyone at all times and locations. Therefore it is a matter of personal choice as to what data are recorded, collected and observed. This affects the **reliability** and **validity** of the findings".

2. Staying In

Once inside, A researcher has to quickly learn the culture and dynamics of a group if they are to participate fully. This may require a range of **skills**:

- the ability to mix easily with strangers.
- creating and maintaining a **plausible back story**: a researcher must invent a past for themselves that won't include telling the group they are a researcher.
- the ability to think quickly on their feet as and when required: **Parker** (1974), for example, had to make decisions about whether to participate in the criminal activities of the gang of youths he was secretly studying.

To participate appropriately in a group the research must have any required **knowledge** and **skills**. Parke and Griffiths (2008), for example, argue that if a researcher lacks the "**insider knowledge**" they *should* have as a group member they risk **exposure** which may jeopardise their ability to stay in the group.

This reflects the general problem that pretending to be someone you're not carries with it the risk of being exposed as a spy. The consequences of exposure vary from group-to-group (the Women's Institute might write a letter of protest, whereas a criminal gang may take things a little bit further) but the general consequence is the end of the research.

The researcher may have to adjust to a situation in which the people being researched have greater expertise and **power** in certain situations. It can be difficult to "**relinquish control**" to those you are secretly studying.

A general problem with covert group membership is that the effort required to successfully enter and remain in the group means the researcher becomes over-integrated and it becomes difficult to separate the roles of participant and observer.

Going native refers to a range of behaviours that may compromise the integrity of the research process.

- At one extreme the researcher may have to choose between being a participant or being an observer (such as when a group engages in criminal activities).
- At the other, the researcher may become so well integrated into the group they cease to be an observer and effectively become a full participant.

Each of the above raise serious issues about research **reliability** and **validity**.

Further **reliability** issues involve the fact the research can't be **replicated**, we have to **trust** the researcher's observations (there's nothing to back them up) and recording data is frequently difficult: the researcher can't take notes or record conversations openly, because to do so would risk exposure.

3. Getting Out

It can be difficult to suddenly leave a group. A member of a criminal gang, for example, can't easily just "stop participating".

For other groups leaving may raise **ethical** problems; from the effect of leaving a group who may have grown to trust and depend on the researcher, to questions about whether covert observation as a research method is exploitative; does, for example, a researcher have the right to secretly spy on people or use them for their own purposes?

