

“A” Level Sociology

A Resource-Based Learning Approach

**Module One:
Theory and Methods**

Unit M7: Participant Observation

These Notes been designed to provide you with a knowledge and understanding of the following syllabus area:

"Demonstrate a knowledge of the different quantitative and qualitative methods including different types of questionnaire, interview and observation techniques, and understand the distinction between primary and secondary data".

The Aims of these Notes are to help you to understand:

1. The methodological arguments for and against the use of Participant Observation.
2. The advantages and disadvantages of Participant Observation as a method of sociological research.

The Objectives of these Notes are to help you to understand:

1. The concept of empathy and how it relates to the idea of Participant Observation.
2. How various sociologists have justified their use of Participant Observation as a method of data collection.
3. The concept of an "observer effect" (sometimes known as the "experimental" or "Hawthorne effect").

Introduction

Although the concept of Participant Observation has already been introduced in the "Primary Methods" Study Packs, in these Notes I want to **develop** some of the **ideas** and **observations** contained in these Packs. In addition, I want to **introduce** you to a **range of writers** who have **used** this method of data collection as the focal point of their research.

- In this respect, these Notes assume that you understand the basic principles involved in the use of Participant Observation as a method of data collection and that you understand the basic difference between, for example, Overt and Covert forms of Participant Observation.

As we have seen, sociologists who adopt the **method** of **Participant Observation** for their research **aim** to **discover nature of social reality by understanding the actor's perception / understanding / interpretation of the social world**. In this respect, **Participant Observation** is sometimes called a "**naturalistic**" **method** that involves the **researcher**,

"Telling it like it is"

or, if you prefer,

"Really understanding what is going on in any given situation".

The **participant observer**, therefore, tries to take **advantage** of the **human ability** to "**empathise**", which in simple terms involves **our ability to see a situation from someone else's point-of-view - to put yourself in "their" shoes to experience the world as "they" experience it**.

The **main idea**, in this respect, is to **participate** in a social **group** whilst, **at the same time, employing the insights and understanding of a trained sociological observer** (whatever they might be when they're at home and sleeping in your bed...). The point, therefore, is to **observe** and **experience** the world as a **participant**, whilst **retaining** an **observer's eye for understanding, analysis** and **explanation**.

As you might expect, **Participant Observation** is a method of data collection that attempts to **understand** the **motives** and **meanings** involved in people's **behaviour** from the **point-of-view** of the **participant**. **Sociologically**, this method tends to be **associated** with the **Interactionist perspective** and this means that the **methodology** is primarily "**interpretive**" (that is, concerned with the attempt to express the **quality** of people's behaviour by interpreting such behaviour from a sociological viewpoint)

Having said this, some form of **quantification / measurement** may be **used** by **participant observers**, although the reasons for quantifying behaviour tend to be somewhat different to those used by non-Interactionists. We can look at the **example** of "**suicide**" to briefly demonstrate this idea.

For a sociologist such as Emile **Durkheim** (working within a **broadly Structuralist** perspective), **suicide** was considered to be a "**social fact**" whose existence could be **deduced** from the **study of patterns of suicide** taken from the analysis of **official statistics**. The **emphasis**, in this respect, was placed upon trying to explain **why different societies had different suicide rates**. Durkheim, therefore, considered **suicide statistics** to be "**facts**" - hard evidence about people's behaviour - that could be used in the explanation of that behaviour.

Maxwell-Atkinson, on the other hand, illustrates the **Interactionist view**, by using an **interpretive methodology** to try to **understand** how both **rates of suicide** and **suicide statistics** were themselves **social constructions**. In this respect, whilst he recognised the idea that rates of suicide could be **measured statistically** ("**quantified**"), **Maxwell-Atkinson's** main concern was to show **how suicide statistics were socially constructed by coroner's "personal" interpretations** about what constituted an "official suicide". That is, he focused upon the fact that, in order for a death to:

- a. Be considered as suicide and
- b. Appear in official statistics

a "**significant actor**" (a **coroner** in this case) had to make a **decision** that, in many cases, is a highly **subjective** one.

While we are not particularly concerned, for the moment, to try and evaluate which of the above is the best way to understand a phenomenon such as suicide, it does illustrate a potentially **significant methodological point**, in that **sociologists** working within **different perspectives** may bring **different methodological techniques to the study of the same social phenomenon**.

- One of the **classic studies** conducted using **Participant Observation** was carried-out by **Erving Goffman** ("**Asylums**", 1968). **Goffman** worked in an **asylum** for the **mentally ill** as an **Assistant Athletic Director**. His research was **mainly covert** (the inmates (patients) and hospital authorities did not know he was doing research), with **overt elements** (a couple of the staff knew he was a researcher).

Goffman attempted to **discover "unofficial reality"** of mental institutions, to:

- a. Answer the question "**what is really going on here?**"
- b. To attempt to **discover** the "**sense**" in a place of **insanity** and, in particular, to analyse **how patients coped** with both their **labelling** as "mentally ill" and the "**abnormal social situation**" in which they found themselves.
For example, patients were:

Closely observed and had little privacy.

They were highly disciplined and regimented by the staff.

They're personal possessions were taken away and, according to Goffman's interpretation, they were "treated like children".

In above respect, the "**hidden and closed**" world that **Goffman** had **penetrated** was both "**bizarre**" and "**abnormal**" in terms of our usual understanding of the social world - yet through his research, **Goffman** claimed to have **discovered** the "**tricks and strategies**" employed by staff and patients in order to **cope** with their situation. He discovered, in short, how **people made sense of an apparently senseless situation**; how:

- a. The Staff and the patients came to terms with it as best they could.
- b. What looked abnormal (in terms of norms of behaviour) to the outsider, was normal to those on the inside.

There have been numerous other studies based around Participant Observation and you might like to investigate one or two of the following:

- **William Foote Whyte "Street Corner Society".**
- **Laud Humphreys "Tea Room Trade".**
- **Howard Becker "Becoming a Marijuana User".**
- **Ned. Polsky "Hustlers, Beats and Others".**
- **Howard Parker "A View From The Boys".**
- **Rosenhan ("On Being Sane in Insane Places")**

Many writers have sought to **justify** their adoption of **Participant Observation** as their main research method, and we can look briefly at how a few of these writers have justified their use of this research method.

Howard Parker:

"...because by visiting the deviants in prison, borstal and other 'human zoos' or by cornering them in classrooms to answer questionnaires, the sociologist misses meeting them as people in their normal society".

David Downes and Paul Rock ("Understanding Deviance").

"It is a theoretical commitment that drives the sociologist into Participant Observation. The claim is made that social behaviour cannot be understood unless it is personally experienced...Sociologists who lean on external accounts and objective evidence can have no appreciation of why people act. Neither can they understand environments and history as their subjects do...Symbolic Interactionists and others who elevate meaning to a central place contend that participation is indispensable to the interpretation of human conduct."

Cicourel:

This study of **juvenile delinquency** involved a **four-year observation** of proceedings in **juvenile courts in America**. One of **Cicourel's** aims was to **understand** the "**interpretive procedures**" used by court officials in their routine interactions (that is, how they made sense of the behaviour around them).

"**Positivist methodology** [e.g. focusing upon the "**official reality**" and **procedures in the courtroom**] would find it impossible to uncover the everyday routines of the police, courts and probation officials because their '**taken for granted**' assumptions about the nature and character of deviant activity are part of everyday activity. Often the style of dress and tone of voice employed by the deviant is used by the control agents as evidence of a defiance of authority".

Anthony Giddens ("Sociology")

"Goffman managed to see the asylum from the patients' point of view rather than in terms of the medical categories applied to them by psychiatrists. 'It is my belief', he wrote, 'that any group of persons, primitives, pilots or patients, develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable and normal once you get close to it'. Goffman's work indicates that what looks "insane" to an outside observer is not quite so irrational when seen in the context of the hospital. Asylums involve forms of discipline, dress and behaviour that make it almost impossible for inmates to behave like people in the outside world."

We can **summarise** the **advantages** and **disadvantages** with this method of social research in the following terms:

- **Some advantages of Participant Observation:**

1. It represents a **rich source of high-quality information**.
2. The **researcher** can **understand** the **social pressures / influences / group norms** etc, that may create particular forms of behaviour. This gives a researcher **insights** into individual and group behaviour and it may allow **researcher** to **formulate hypotheses** that explain such behaviour.
3. It is a very **flexible approach**, since the **researcher does not pre-judge the issue** by deciding in **advance** what is / is not important when studying social behaviour. In this respect, the **researcher** can **react** to events / ideas, **follow leads**, pursue avenues of research that **had not occurred** to him / her **before** their **involvement** with a group.
4. The **researcher** is able to **formulate and test hypotheses** and may be able to **redefine possible personal pre-conceptions** in the light of **experience** within the group.
5. This type of research produces a **depth of detailed information** about all aspects of a group's behaviour.

- **Some disadvantages of Participant Observation:**

1. A **researcher** has to **learn the culture** of a group if they are to participate - this may not always be easy / possible.
2. Most **research** is **restricted** to **small-scale studies** carried out over a **long period** and the **group** being studied is **unlikely** to be **representative** other social groups. It's **unlikely** a researcher will be able to **generalise** their findings from one study to the next (is **Goffman's** study applicable to **all** mental institutions?).
3. There may be **problems of access** to all **levels** of a group (although this can be **over-come**, to some extent, by the type of Participant Observation being used - this is usually a **problem** of **covert**, rather than overt, Participant Observation).
4. This method of data collection requires great deal of **skill and commitment** from the **researcher** (the ability to **fit-in** with the people being studied, the ability to **communicate** with groups members **on their level** and **terms, tact, observation**, etc.).

We can develop some of the above "disadvantages" by looking briefly at a few Participant Observation problems in context:

- **The problem of gaining entry into a group (in this instance a juvenile gang) and their acceptance of a researcher's presence.**

a. W.F. Whyte ("Street Corner Society")

Whyte was **substantially older** than the members of the **juvenile gang** whose behaviour he wanted to study. His **solution** to this problem came through doing **overt Participant Observation**. **Whyte** gained the **co-operation of gang's leader ("Doc")**, who served as his **"sponsor"** with rest of gang members.

b. Howard Parker ("A View From The Boys")

Parker's **solution** to the **"access problem"** came through having **met members** of the gang he wanted to study through a **country holiday centre** for deprived children. **Parker's appearance** ("boozy, suitably dressed and ungroomed and knowing the score about theft behaviour and sexual exploits") **helped** him to **gain entrance / acceptance**

- **The problem of researcher changing the behaviour of the group** (this is known as the **"observer effect"** and we will look at this concept in more detail in a moment).

a. W.F. Whyte ("Street Corner Society")

Whyte recognised - but never really solved - this problem. In a classic observation, Doc put his finger on this problem when he said:

"You've slowed me up plenty, now when I do something I have to think 'what would Bill Whyte want to know about it?'. Before I used to do things by instinct."

b. Howard Parker ("A View From The Boys")

One of the justifications for doing **covert** Participant Observation is that it supposedly **avoids** this type of problem. However, **Parker's** involvement with the gang (although **covert**) **changed their behaviour not** because of his **presence** in the group but because of his **actions** as **part of the group**.

For example, **Parker** frequently tried to **stop gang members** from **stealing cars**. He also **provided legal advice** to gang members charged with theft. The question that has to be asked here was did Parker's behaviour as an accepted member of the group change their behaviour?

- **The problem of changing from a "Participant Observer" to a "Non-Observing Participant"** (sometimes called "going native")..

a. Whyte.

He found that, as his research progressed, he became **so involved** with the lives of gang members that he progressively **came to see himself** as "**one of the gang**" and **not** as a researcher who just happened to be researching gang behaviour.

b. Parker.

Parker frequently found himself in the position of engaging in criminal activity whilst in the gang (receiving stolen goods, for example).

He claimed that such involvement was **necessary** (although **not totally ethical**), if he was to maintain the trust, respect and friendship of the people he was researching.

- **The problem of recording data.**

a. Whyte.

Faced with problem of knowing what to ask and when to ask it, Whyte followed Doc's advice to

"Stop asking questions. Hang around and you'll learn the answers in the long run".

b. Erving Goffman - Asylums.

As a (largely) **covert observer**, Goffman found that he had to **trust his powers of observation and memory**. He used the device of a "**field diary**" to record information - at the end of every day, Goffman "wrote up" his observations in this diary (which raises clear **problems of accuracy, memory and interpretation**).

- **The problem of ethics.**

Parker.

A **major ethical problem** for sociological researchers is the extent to which a researcher should **deceive** people by **pretending** to be "**one of them**".

Parker also chose to **withhold some data from publication**. He **discussed** publication of certain information with the gang members and left the final decision over some matters with them.

His **primary concern**, in this respect, was that his **research did not harm gang members personally**. This may go some way to **resolving ethical problems**, but it raises the **problem of not** being able to give a **full account** of the behaviour that has been studied.

Whether or not **overt or covert** Participant Observation is the best form of Participant Observation to use is a question that has produced heated **arguments** amongst Interactionist sociologists. Noted below are **two opposing views...**

1. Polsky ("Hustlers, Beats and Others", 1971): Overt Participant Observation.

"You damned well better not pretend to be 'one of them', because they will test this claim out and one of two things will happen: either you will...get sucked into 'participant' observation of the sort you would rather not undertake, or you will be exposed, with still grater negative consequences. You must let the criminals know who you are and if it is done properly it does not sabotage the research".

2. Laud Humphreys ("Tea Room Trade", 1970): Covert Participant Observation.

"From the beginning, my decision was to continue the practice of the field study in passing as a deviant...there are good reasons for following this method of Participant Observation.

In the first place, I am convinced 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. To wear a button [badge] saying 'I am a watchbird, watching you' into a tea room would instantly eliminate all action except the flushing of toilets and the exiting of all present.

Polsky has done excellent observation of pool hustlers because he is experienced and welcome in their game - he is accepted as one of them. he might also do well, as he suggests, in interviewing a jewel thief or a fence in his tavern hangout. But it should be noted that he does not propose watching them steal, whereas my research required observation of criminal acts.

The second reason is to prevent distortion. Hypothetically, let us assume that a few men could be found to continue their sexual activity while under observation. How 'normal' could that activity be?".

The "Observer Effect": Part 1

Just as I noted earlier the idea of an "**interview effect**" (whereby the **relationship** between the **interviewer** and the **respondent** may be a **significant factor** in the **data production and collection process**), so too do we have to be aware of the potential "**observer effect**" in the study of human behaviour.

Just as **advocates** of an "**ethnographic approach**" (involving such methods as overt Participant Observation), to the study of human behaviour argue that **interviews are inherently biased** because of the nature of the relationship between the participants, **critics** of this type of observational approach to data collection argue that it is **impossible to openly observe people's behaviour without somehow changing that behaviour**.

Before we look at an experimental example of the "observer effect", however, it might be useful to note a few things about the nature of observation as it relates to everyday behaviour in our society.

It seems to be a **reasonable assumption** that, in our society, we **do not like** to be **stared at** (or **closely observed**). Part of the reason for not liking to be closely observed is "**self-consciousness**".

For the most part, **everyday behaviour** such as eating, drinking and so forth, is something we do so often and so regularly that it becomes almost **automatic** - we do it **without thinking (consciously)** about **why** and **how** we do it.

When we are **aware** of **someone watching us**, however, we **assume** (rightly or wrongly) that they are doing so for a **purpose**. As human beings living in a social environment, **we take note of** other's **behaviour towards us** as part-and-parcel of understanding "what's going on" in any process of interaction - it gives us clues and cues about expected forms of behaviour and so forth.

Therefore, if we are **aware** of someone **watching us**, it forces us to be **conscious** of our self and our behaviour - in effect, we "**look at ourselves**" **as we think others are looking at us**. When we do this, of course, we start to think consciously about what we are doing and, since this is something we don't normally do, it is rather a **strange experience** - and, hence, a rather **unnerving** one. It **disturbs** us for at least three main reasons:

- **Firstly**, it forces us to **think** about the things we normally do "without bothering to stop and think about why or how we do it" - in short, we start to **examine our own behaviour** (even if it's behaviour that's as simple as eating).
- **Secondly**, when we become "**self-conscious**" about our behaviour, we **change** the way we **behave**. This follows because a significant aspect of (self-) conscious behaviour is an **awareness of others**. If someone is behaving "**abnormally**" (that is, indulging in behaviour that goes against the norm in some way), we want to know **why** - and this forces us to **look at our behaviour** to see, initially, if something we are doing is making someone behave abnormally.
- **Thirdly**, it forces us to try and **understand** why someone is behaving towards us in an "**abnormal**" or **unusual** way - and this attempt to understand normally involves asking why someone is behaving in an unusual fashion;

These **responses** to being observed may range from the physical response of blushing, getting flustered and so forth, through the enquiring,

"Why are you staring at me?",

to the downright aggressive,

"Am I wearing something of your's, mate - and what do you want to do about it?".

In our society, "**staring**" (or "**observational behaviour**" as no-one but Sociologists ever says) clearly has different **connotations** and **meaning** for the people indulging in such behaviour in relation to such things as:

- **The social context of the stare**

For example, **students** are **expected to stare** at their **teacher** (it is "**normal** behaviour" in the **educational context**), since they are supposed to be listening (I said "supposed to be listening") to what they have to say. The **teacher** is the **focus** of attention and therefore **interprets** staring as a sign that the student is

listening. A student who refuses to look at the teacher, therefore, may be considered to have something they want to hide...

- **The purpose of the stare**

For example, if someone has stolen my pen and I accuse you of stealing it, I may take your refusal to "**look me in the eye**" when you deny taking it as an **admission of guilt**. The reason for this, of course, is the **cultural belief** that it's more difficult to lie to someone if you're staring them in the face - in short, the idea that the accused's "**body language**" (their supposedly unconscious admission of guilt) will somehow give them away, even as they verbally (that is, consciously) deny the theft.

If you're interested (or even still awake) this is actually a mistaken belief (it's a modern myth) - the "best" thief is one who is able to **convince themselves** that theft is not wrong, therefore they have nothing to feel guilty about...

Additionally, "**staring**" has a **different meaning** (in our society at least) conditional upon the **gender** of the participants indulging in this behaviour:

A **man staring** at a **woman** (or vice versa), for example, is normally interpreted by the recipient of the stare as saying,

"I fancy you and would really like to get to know you better".

To **return the stare** (to **hold someone's gaze**) is to **signal** to them that you reciprocate their suggestion.

To **avoid their stare**, on the other hand, is to **signal** that you're really not very interested so why don't they bu...buzz-off and stare at someone else.

A **man staring** at a **man**, on the other hand, is normally **interpreted** as an **aggressive signal**, for whatever reason.

The Observer Effect: Part 2

While it's neither fruitful nor possible to explore the above ideas in any great detail in this context, it's important to recognise the proposition that "**being openly observed**" may **affect** the way we behave - and this is significant in relation to the **validity** of any **data** we are trying to collect through our observations of people.

One of the first indications of a possible "**observer effect**" occurred in a study carried-out by **Elton Mayo** in America in the 1920's.

Mayo's study was intended to observe the effects of **environmental changes** on **worker productivity** and it was carried-out in the **Hawthorne factory of the Western Electricity Company** (hence, the "**observer effect**" is sometimes called the "**Hawthorne Effect**").

Mayo was asked to conduct various **experiments** on a group of workers to allow the owners of the company to create the environmental conditions in their workplace that would get the highest level of productivity out of their employees. In this respect, Mayo manipulated the conditions under which people worked by adjusting such factors as:

- Levels of heating,
- Levels of lighting,
- Length of rest breaks

and so forth.

Each time a particular environmental factor was changed, Mayo measured any resulting changes in worker productivity over time.

However, what Mayo discovered from this study was that, **no-matter what the environmental conditions, worker productivity always seemed to increase...**

At least two possible explanations could be used to account for this:

1. That environmental conditions make little difference to the way in which people work.
2. The presence of the observer (and the knowledge that they were being watched) somehow changed the behaviour of the workers...

Summary.

1. Participant Observation is a method of data collection that takes advantage of the human ability to empathize - in simple terms, to "put yourself in someone else's position and experience the things that they experience". Additionally, this method focuses upon the day-to-day interaction of people in a "natural" setting.
2. There are two basic forms of Participant Observation:
 - a. **Overt** - where the researcher is known as a researcher to the people being studied.
 - b. **Covert** - where the researcher does not reveal him / herself as a researcher to the people they are studying.
3. Participant Observation is usually associated with the Interactionist perspective in sociology and tends to be used to study relatively small-scale forms of social interaction over a long period.
4. Participant observers attempt to understand the meanings and interpretations that individuals give to both their own behaviour and that of the people with whom they associate.
5. Covert Participant Observation frequently creates ethical problems for the (secret) observer - especially where the researcher is participating in deviant behaviour.
6. The advantages of this approach include being able to study people in their normal surroundings, getting to know and understand the people being studied as individuals and being able to experience "first hand" the social pressures and relationships that inform people's behaviour.
7. The disadvantages of this approach include the length of time involved in an observational study (normally months or years), the inability to generalize your conclusions about the small group being studied to wider social groups, the difficulty of maintaining a dual role as both observer and participant (this is especially difficult in the case of covert observation).
8. A major problem with overt Participant Observation is the observer effect; does the presence of an observer change the "normal" behaviour of the people being observed? This problem does not arise in the case of covert Participant Observation.
9. Participant Observation is usually seen as a method that is not particularly reliable, but highly valid,