

Participant Observation: Overview

Some research methods (such as questionnaires) stress the importance of the researcher not becoming "personally involved" with the respondent, in the sense of the researcher maintaining both a personal and a social distance between themselves and the people they are researching. **Participant observation**, however, is sometimes called a form of subjective sociology, not because the researcher aims to impose their beliefs on the respondent (this would simply produce invalid data), but because the aim is to understand the social world from the **subject's** point-of-view.

This method involves the researcher "getting to know" the people they're studying by entering their world and participating - either openly or secretly - in that world. This means you put yourself "in the shoes" of the people you're studying in an attempt to experience events in the way they experience them.

Social Distance

The technical term for this social distance is **objectivity** - the ability to remain detached, aloof or personally separate from the people you are researching.

There are a couple of important dimensions to objectivity (namely, personal and methodological) but for the moment we can consider it as involving the ability to avoid:

The intrusion of our personal beliefs (or values) into the research process.

Influencing the way respondents reply to our questions or behaviour.

Subjective Sociology

This, in some ways, is similar to the aim in an unfocused interview. However, a new dimension is added to the research process by the ability to "see for yourself" the behaviour that people describe in an interview or questionnaire. The distinction is perhaps initially confusing, but it will become clearer in a moment.

Empathy

This is called empathy - the ability, as human beings, to "see ourselves as we think other people see us".

In this respect, the Interactionist sociologist George Herbert Mead ("Mind, Self and Society", 1933) has argued that empathy (or, as he terms it, the "ability to take the part of the other") is a valuable human ability that the researcher should exploit in order to understand how people experience the social world.

Sociologists who use participant observation aim to discover the nature of social reality by understanding the **actor's** perception / understanding / interpretation of the social world. For this reason, Participant Observation is sometimes called a naturalistic method and tends to be associated with the **Interactionist** or **Social Action** perspective. The methodology is, as you would expect, primarily interpretive.

The participant observer, therefore, exploits the human ability to **empathise** - the main objective being to **participate** in a social group while, at the same time, employing the insights and understanding of a sociological **observer**. The point, therefore, is to **observe** and **experience** the world as a **participant**, while retaining an **observer's eye** for understanding, analysis and explanation.

Naturalistic Method

In this particular sense, Participant Observation is a naturalistic method because it involves the researcher:

"Telling it like it is" or, if you prefer

"Really understanding, through personal experience, what is going on in any given situation".

In other words, Participant Observation is a method that attempts to understand the **motives** and **meanings** of people's behaviour from the viewpoint of those involved in the behaviour being studied.

Interpretive

That is, concerned with the attempt to express the **quality** of people's behaviour by interpreting such behaviour from a sociological viewpoint.

Although some form of quantification / measurement may be used by participant observers, the reasons for quantifying behaviour tend to be somewhat different to those used by non-Interactionists.

To complete this general overview, we can note some basic justifications for the use of Participant Observation in the following arguments.

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

Parker justifies Participant Observation in the following terms:

"...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".

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

David Downes and **Paul Rock** justify Participant Observation in the following way:

"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..."

Interactionists and others who elevate meaning to a central place contend that participation is indispensable to the interpretation of human conduct."

3. Anton Cicourel ("The Social Organisation of Juvenile Justice")

Anton Cicourel's 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 on 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".

4. [Anthony Giddens](#) ("Sociology")

Anthony Giddens describes Goffman's use of Participant Observation in the following terms: "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'. His work indicates that what looks "insane" to an outside observer is not 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."

Uses

We can think about the **general strengths / uses** of Participant Observation in terms of:

1. It's [flexibility](#) as a research method.

Because a researcher doesn't pre-judge the issue by deciding in advance what is / is not important when studying social behaviour, they can react to events / ideas, follow leads, pursue avenues of research that had not occurred to them before their involvement with a group. In this respect, a researcher can test hypotheses and may be able to redefine possible personal pre-conceptions about someone's behaviour in the light of their experience in the group.

2. The [quality and depth](#) of information the method provides.

Participant observation generates a rich source of highly-detailed, high-quality, information about people's behaviour. In short, this type of research produces a depth of detailed information about all aspects of a group's behaviour.

3. The opportunity for [understanding \(empathy\)](#) it encourages.

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.

Limitations

Like any research method, Participant Observation has a number of **general weaknesses / limitations**. We can think of these in terms of:

1. The general [scope and scale](#) of observational studies.

Most participant observation is restricted to fairly **small-scale studies** carried out over a long period and the group being studied is unlikely to be representative of any other social group. It's also unlikely a researcher will be able to generalise their findings from one study to the next (for example, is [Goffman's study of a mental asylum](#) applicable to all mental institutions?).

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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). His research attempted to discover the "unofficial reality" of mental institutions, to:

- a. Answer the question "what is really going on here?"
- b. 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.

Coping

Some aspects of this abnormal social situation (which the patients had to come to terms with) were identified by Goffman when he observed that patients:

Were closely observed and had **little privacy**.

Were **disciplined** and **regimented** by the staff.

Had their personal possessions taken away and, according to Goffman's interpretation, they were "**treated like children**".

Unofficial Reality

The "hidden and closed" world 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. How, in short, people made sense of an apparently senseless situation - in other words, how:

The Staff and the patients came to terms with it as best they could.

What looked abnormal (in terms of norms of behaviour) to the outsider, was normal to those on the inside.

2. The researcher's level of participation / involvement in a group.

A researcher has to learn the culture of a group if he / she is to participate fully in their behaviour and this may not always be easy or possible. If a researcher is too young, too old, too male or too female for the group they want to research this will cause problems of participation.

As we will also see, if a researcher is involved in covert participant observation their ability to blend seamlessly into a group is absolutely crucial to the success or failure of the research project...

3. The skills required of a researcher.

Participant observation requires a great deal of **skill and commitment** from the researcher. The success or failure of the research will hinge on such factors as the ability to fit-in with the people being studied and the ability to communicate with groups members on their level and terms. It will also, at different times, require tact, clear and careful observation, the ability to separate the role of participant from that of observer and so forth.

In other words, before committing yourself to participant observation you need to be certain you have the time, money, resources and skills required to carry this type of research through...

Overt Participant Observation

Introduction

Overt Participant Observation, as the name suggests, involves the researcher being open with the group they are going to study. In other words, before joining a group the researcher is likely to inform the group's members (either personally or through the agency of a sponsor) about such things as the **purpose** of the research, its **scope**, how **long** the research will last and so forth.

In this respect, therefore, the research is done with the permission and **co-operation** of the group and the fact of being open with the group being researched carries with it certain advantages and disadvantages as far as the overall conduct of the research is concerned.

Sponsor

A "sponsor" is someone within the group you want to study who is willing to both vouch for you and explain your presence to the other group members.

Sponsors are often a good way for researcher's to gain entrance to a group - especially if the sponsor has a relatively high status within the group - because other group members are less likely to show hostility to the researcher if their presence is both explained and justified by the sponsor.

A classic example of sponsorship is William **Whyte's** study ("**Street Corner Society**") in which he observed the activities and behaviour of an American Street gang. Although a lot older than the gang members, Whyte was accepted by them because his presence was explained and protected by his friendship with the gang's leader, "Doc".

Ethics

For some sociologists the question of whether or not you have the group's permission to study them is a question of **ethics** - in this instance, does a researcher have **the right** to study a group or individual **without** their knowledge and / or permission?

Whatever the rights and wrongs of covert research it's evident that **overt** participant observation neatly **avoids** this potentially tricky question.

Open

In simple terms, the technique here is that of "hanging-around" the group, observing behaviour, asking questions about that behaviour (when appropriate) and recording what is happening.

The researcher is involved, to some extent, with the group itself (although not necessarily as a full participating member) and experiences things as group members experience them.

In basic terms, therefore, the group being studied is observed in its "natural setting" (rather than from the "second-hand" reporting about "what goes on" that is received from questionnaires and interviews).

Advantages

These advantages fall in to three main categories.

Firstly, if you're able to join a group openly, the problem of access can be fairly easily overcome.

Secondly, it also goes some way to resolving a major problem with this type of ethnographic research, namely that of how to record data while observing people's behaviour.

Finally, Overt Participant Observation makes it **less likely** (although it may never completely overcome the problem) the researcher will "go native" (that is, become so thoroughly-integrated into the group you're studying you cease to become an observer and simply become a participant...).

Ethnography

Ethnography, in literal terms, means the study of cultural behaviour.

Translated into sociological research this involves the attempt to get as close as possible to the behaviour you are studying in order to achieve an understanding of that behaviour that is as authentic as possible.

Participant Observation, by its very nature, lends itself to this type of research since, by definition, it involves experiencing the behaviour you are studying / trying to explain.

Integration

The concept of "integration" involves the idea of having a sense of belonging to a group.

In other words, if someone is well-integrated into a group they see themselves as being a part of that group (in terms of such things as norms, values, roles and so forth). A well-integrated individual cares for both the group as a whole and its individual members - which makes over-integration a real problem for participant observers since they need to retain some sort of objective distance from the group if they are to validly observe it...

Access

"Access" to a group needs to be considered in relation to two main ideas:

Firstly, getting into a group and, **secondly**, the research you are able to do once you are part of the group.

In terms of the **former**, overt participant observation may give you access to groups who could not be studied covertly because the researcher does not have the same characteristics as the group.

Characteristics

For example, it would not be possible for a female researcher to covertly join a group - such as a juvenile gang or a Freemason's lodge - who only allow entrance to men.

Similarly, it would be difficult for a young researcher to covertly participate in the workings of the senior management in an trans-national company, just as it would be impossible for a man to covertly research a group of nuns...

In terms of the **latter** idea, if the researcher is able to join a group with their knowledge and permission it means they will have access to all **levels** of the group - something that's important if the group has a clear hierarchical structure, for example.

Hierarchy

Many groups have complex organisational structures, whereby access is restricted to people of a certain level.

A school, for example, may have a head teacher whose office is "out-of-bounds" to staff and students. A researcher who joined the school covertly as a student would not have legitimate access to the head teacher's office, the staffroom and so forth.

Similarly, if a researcher covertly joins a large company as a shop-floor worker they would not have access to discussions carried-out in the company's Boardroom.

Recording Data

The fact the researcher is involved with the group they are studying in an **open** way means it is relatively easy to generate and record data (especially in comparison with covert participant observation where the fact of being in the group secretly would make the group suspicious if you openly recorded conversations...).

With overt participant observation the researcher is, for example, able to record conversations, ask questions, take notes and the like with the knowledge and co-operation of the people involved.

Although group members are aware of the researcher, these things should, with time, become an almost natural, imperceptible, aspect of group interaction and, consequently, will not change the way the group members behave...

"Go Native"

With overt participation, the researcher should find it easier to separate the roles of **participant** and **observer**. There is, consequently, a reduced chance of becoming so immersed in the behaviour of the group the researcher ceases to be an observer and simply become a participant - just another member of the group.

The term for this is "**going native**" - where the researcher **ceases** to balance the roles of participant and observer and, instead, simply participates like any other group member. A researcher who "**goes native**" effectively stops being a researcher...

However, this is not invariably the case. **Whyte** ("Street Corner Society") found that 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.

Getting In...

Overt participant observation makes it possible to gain access to groups where the researcher does not have the usual qualifications for entry (for example, being the right age, gender or ethnicity).

William Whyte ("Street Corner Society") for example, was substantially older than the members of the juvenile gang whose behaviour he wanted to study. His solution to the "problem of access" came through doing overt participant observation; he gained the co-operation of gang's leader ("Doc"), who served to explain Whyte's presence in the group to other gang members. Additionally, some groups require their members to have actual qualifications (a degree, for example) and overt participant observation overcomes this **potential obstacle** to entrance.

Disadvantages

This type of research does have a number of potential weaknesses / limitations.

These range from the relatively mundane (the amounts of time and expense involved), through possible problems with data interpretation to more-serious questions about the researcher's actual levels of involvement in the group and the extent to which this may be considered a naturalistic method of research...

Time and Expense

As you might expect, ethnographic research is, in general a very **time-consuming** exercise - for a researcher to become fully-involved with a group may take **months** or in some cases **years** (and that's without thinking about how long it will take to write-up and publish the data collected). During the period of involvement with the group the researcher has to be able to **fund** him / herself (food, clothing, shelter...) - another consideration to be taken into account when contemplating this type of research...

Data Interpretation

Overt observation makes demands on the researcher, not only in terms of observing and recording behaviour accurately, but also in terms of interpreting data. How, for example, do you decide which observations - among many - are significant?

Significance

The issue here is how the researcher goes about trying to make sense of the data they collect. On the one hand, behaviour that seems significant to the researcher (in their judgement) may not seem very significant to the people involved.

On the other hand, behaviour that appears mundane and uninteresting to the researcher may not be viewed in the same way by those involved.

Interpretations

Since we, as readers of a piece of research, are dependent on the accuracy of a researcher's recording and interpretation of the behaviour they are studying we have to place a great deal of **trust** in the ability of the researcher.

There is no easy way of testing whether or not this trust is misplaced, of course, so it frequently becomes a matter, on the reader's part, of **assuming** that a researcher did and saw what they claimed to do and see.

Participant observation studies, by their very nature, are impossible to exactly repeat ("replicate") - a fact which gives them limited **reliability**.

In another respect, any social group (especially a complex, one) has many things happening at the same time. In such situations it's difficult for the researcher to observe everyone and decisions have to be made about **who** to observe and **when** to observe them - significant evidence may be missed, leading to invalid interpretations of the group's behaviour).

Complexity

Complex groups can be loosely defined as social groups that are **hierarchically stratified** in some way, such as to require **different levels** of competence, expertise or qualifications for entry to the different levels.

An example here might be a **large business organisation**. The various levels might be something like Directors of the company, senior managers, middle managers, junior managers and various grades of non or semi-managerial workers.

Even a researcher who is openly studying such a group will have to make decisions about who to observe at various points in their research.

Finally, human interaction is usually very complex - even in relatively simple forms of everyday behaviour. Just as we can "misunderstand" behaviour in our everyday interactions, so too is it possible for the sociologist to misinterpret the significance of some forms of behaviour.

Everyday Behaviour

Even behaviour as simple and mundane as sitting in a classroom with a teacher and other students reveals a degree of **complexity** when you start to dig beneath the surface.

Values, for example, are being expressed, confirmed or denied and a multitude of **norms** of behaviour will be in evidence (when to talk, when not to talk, when it's permissible to leave the room and so forth).

In addition, a variety of different **power and authority relationships** will be in evidence as well as various mechanisms of **social control**...

Naturalism

The problem here is that, even though people are being studied in their natural environment / habitat and the research is carried-out with the co-operation of the people involved, there is no way of measuring how the **presence** of the observer **influences** the behaviour of group members.

The basic question, therefore, is that of the extent to which people who know they are being studied change the way they "normally" behave.

Is the observer seeing "normal behaviour" or does the observer's presence produce an unknown level of change in people's behaviour? **W.F. Whyte** ("Street Corner Society") recognised - but never really solved - this problem.

Street Corner Society

In a classic observation, the leader of the juvenile gang being observed by Whyte ("Doc"), put his finger on this problem when he said to Whyte:

"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."

Involvement

A major problem is that involvement with the group being studied may be too **superficial**. Given that one of the purposes of participant observation is to **experience** the world from the viewpoint of the people being studied, if the researcher does not become sufficiently involved with the group then this type of data might not be collected.

An example might be observation of a group involved in criminal activities. Clearly, to understand how and why people commit crimes it would be necessary to accompany group members on their criminal expeditions.

Example

However, for the sociologist this might not be desirable, either **ethically** - since such behaviour might be interpreted as encouraging people to commit criminal acts - or **practically** - the police, for example, are likely to take a dim view of a sociologist caught shop-lifting or stealing a car. The plea that "I was only a participant observer doing sociological research" is unlikely to be accepted since by accompanying someone in the commission of a crime you are an accessory to that crime - which is a criminal offence....

Covert Participant Observation Introduction

This version of participant observation involves the researcher joining and researching a group **without informing** the members of that group. In this respect, the research is carried-out **secretly** (**covertly**), since as far as the other members of the group are aware, the researcher has simply joined (or been admitted to) the group to participate in their usual activities.

Covert

By deciding to **fully participate** in the group being researched, the sociologist may, of course, have to become involved in various forms of **unethical** or personally **distasteful** behaviour. Depending on the people you are studying, this may also mean you are exposed to **dangerous** and / or **criminal**, behaviour...

This method has certain [advantages](#) and [disadvantages](#) for the researcher, since they will have to balance the twin roles of researcher and participant whilst keeping the former role secret from other group members.

Advantages

Covert participant observation has a number of advantages over both more traditional methods of research (such as questionnaires and interviews) and the related form of **overt** participant observation.

For example, this method makes it possible for the researcher to gain [access](#) to groups that would not normally allow themselves to be studied.

Access Problems

This, of course, can be considered a potential **weakness** or **limitation** of covert participant observation. However, sociologists have successfully **solved** this problem on occasions. **Howard Parker's** ("A View From The Boys") 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**") as he described himself) helped him to gain acceptance by the gang he was studying.

In addition, since the group under observation are not aware they are being researched, the problem of an [observer effect](#) is **avoided**.

Observer Effect

The potential problem of an [observer effect](#) is avoided precisely because the group are unaware they're being studied. The researcher, therefore, can safely assume they really are observing people's "normal behaviour". However, although this is a clear strength of the method, it is not without its problems.

As **Howard Parker** ("A View From The Boys") discovered, his involvement with a juvenile gang (although **covert**) changed their behaviour **not** because of his presence in the group but because of his **actions** as part of the group. Parker, for example, frequently tried to stop gang members from stealing cars and he also provided legal advice to gang members charged with theft. The question here, therefore, was the extent to which his **behaviour** changed the behaviour of the group...

Just as advocates of an "ethnographic approach" (such as overt or covert Participant Observation), argue that interviews are inherently biased because of the nature of the relationship between the participants, **critics** of overt participant observation argue it is impossible to openly observe people's behaviour without somehow changing that behaviour. Thus, if the knowledge of "being openly observed" affects the way we behave this is significant in terms of the **validity** of any data we are trying to collect through our observations. **Covert participant observation** should, therefore, avoid the classic form of observer effect.

Example

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 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 they were being watched) changed the behaviour of the workers...

Finally, by becoming a member of a group the researcher can personally experience incidents and events and, by so doing, arrive at a richer, **more detailed**, account of the factors that promote and motive people's behaviour.

Personal Experience

Personal involvement means the researcher is able to gather data which, as an interviewer for example, they might not have thought to collect.

In addition, the covert observer may come, through personal experience, to understand the **meanings** and **motivations** within a group that explain **why** people behave in certain ways. In this respect, two points can usually be noted:

Firstly, people do not always clearly understand why they behave in certain ways (which is why sociological data is required). By combining the role of (full) participant and (detached / impartial) observer the sociologist may be able to understand situations and events the participant is incapable of understanding and / or explaining.

Secondly, when we look at behaviour "from the outside, looking in" it's frequently difficult to explain why people would want to behave in ways we may find distasteful, disgusting or perverse. By becoming a part of a group the researcher is able to see things from it's member's perspective, which may provide a clearer **understanding** about people's behaviour.

Access

The ability to gain access to groups that would not normally allow themselves to be studied is a useful **strength** of this method since it allows sociologists to investigate behaviour that is normally **hidden** from both researchers and the wider public.

Using covert participation, therefore, a researcher can study **illegal behaviour** (a criminal gang, for example), deviant behaviour and various forms of "**secret**" behaviour.

Deviance

Deviant behaviour, in this particular sense, is behaviour which may **not** be illegal but which is sufficiently distasteful to people generally to make the participants wary of "outside interest" in their activities.

A example here is Laud Humphries' study of male homosexuals in America ("Tea Room Trade"). Humphreys justified his covert participation in the following terms:

"From the beginning, my decision was to continue the practice of the field study [covert participant observation] 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... 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?"

"Freemasons", for example, are a secretive organisation who admit (male) members only by **invitation** (a problem here, of course, might be how to get yourself invited to join such a group in the first place...).

Disadvantages

There are a number of potential **disadvantages** with covert participant observation. Getting into a group may not be a simple matter since to pass as an ordinary group member the researcher must **share the characteristics** of the people they are studying. Once in, it may be impossible to get access to everyone in the group.

With this type of **secretive** research there is always the problem of the researcher "[going native](#)" (thereby **ceasing to observe** the group **objectively**). The ability to [record](#) data is also a major problem, since the researcher **cannot openly record** this information. This means the **reader** of the research has to take it on [trust](#) the researcher saw what they claimed to see within the group - which involves questions of both data **reliability** and **validity** that cannot always be easily answered by the covert researcher. Finally, of course, there may be general [ethical](#) questions about this type of research...

Entrance

The researcher may not, for one reason or another, be able to join a group covertly for reasons such as:

Gender: A man could not covertly study a group of nuns...

Age: A middle-aged researcher could not join a gang of youths...

Access: Many groups (such as Freemasons, for example) only allow people to join their group by invitation. In addition, various professional occupations (doctors, teachers, lawyers and so forth) require particular qualifications and a "non-qualified" sociologist would not be able to join such groups covertly.

Access

Even where the problem of entrance has been overcome, a covert researcher will not have access to all levels of a group (especially hierarchical groups such as a business organisation, for example).

Thus, in a **factory** it may be possible to join the group as a **shop-floor worker** (giving good access to people at this level), but someone employed in this capacity would not have access to boardroom discussions and decision-making.

"Going Native"

One of the major problems covert participant observers have is that of **separating** their role of participant from that of observer.

The covert researcher is trying to be "two different people" at the same time and it may be difficult to remember which role is appropriate at which time. The researcher may become so involved in their participation they cease to accurately record data.

Howard Parker ("A View From The Boys") frequently found himself in the position of engaging in criminal activity while in the gang (receiving stolen goods, for example). He argued 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.

Recording Data

Recording information will be difficult because the researcher **cannot** simply take **notes** or **record conversations** openly. Similarly, the ability to question people about what they are doing and why they are doing it will not be easy, since such behaviour is unlikely to be part of people's "normal", everyday, behaviour. The researcher who did such things would be very quickly exposed.

One way around this problem is to keep a field diary, where the researcher writes down observations in quiet moments at the end of the day. While this is a solution, it does mean that the researcher must remember things clearly and accurately. They must also make decisions about what events were important / unimportant hours (or days) after they occurred.

Field Diary

As a (largely) covert observer, **Erving Goffman** ("Asylums") found he had to trust his powers of observation and memory.

He used a **field diary** to record information and, at the end of every day, Goffman wrote-up his observations in this diary.

While this may be one of the few ways available to the covert researcher to record their observations, it does raise clear problems of accuracy, memory and interpretation. This, in turn, must also raise questions about the reliability and validity of covert research.

Questioning

Although a largely **overt observer**, W.F. **Whyte** ("Street Corner Society") was frequently faced with problem of knowing what to ask and when to ask it.

Eventually, **Whyte** followed his **sponsor** Doc's advice to:

"Stop asking questions.

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

Trust

As with all types of participant observation, the data collected is based on the **subjective impressions** of the observer.

In short, we as readers of this research have to take on **trust** that behaviour, events and experiences were exactly as described by the sociologist.

In addition, what we may be getting from a piece of research may simply be the **subjective interpretation** of the researcher about "what was happening within the group" rather than the reality of the situation from the group's point of view.

Ethics

There are **ethical problems** involved in covert observation, ranging from the fact that by **spying** on people you are not being entirely honest with them (you are, in a sense, **exploiting** them for your own ends) to the problem of suddenly ceasing to involve yourself in the lives of people who may have grown to like, trust and depend on you.

Thus, for **Parker** ("A View From The Boys") an ethical problem was the extent to which researchers should **deceive** people by pretending to be "one of them". Parker, for example, chose to withhold some data from publication and discussed publication of certain information with the gang members (he left the final decision over some matters with them). His main concern was that his research **did not harm** gang members. This may resolve ethical problems, but raises the problem of not being able to give a full account of the behaviour studied.

Participant Observation Reliability

Participant observation (whether overt or covert) is **not** the most reliable research method. Such studies are, by their very nature, **impossible** to repeat and the data they produce is, when all's said and done, simply the **opinion** of **one observer**.

In addition, the reliability of overt participant observation can be further questioned in terms of the extent to which the presence of the observer actually changes the behaviour of those being studied.

However, while such studies may **lack reliability** it is evident that the validity of the data gained can be impressive.

Reliability

In simple terms, data can be considered broadly **reliable** if the **same results** (or broadly similar) can be gained by different researchers asking the same questions to the same (or broadly similar) people.

Data reliability, therefore, is concerned with ideas such as:

The consistency of the data collected.

The precision (or lack of same) with which it is collected.

The repeatability ("replication") of the data collection method.

Consistency

In basic terms, when considering the consistency of the data collected the researcher needs to consider if, for example, the same question asked of the same person in similar circumstances, will produce the same answer...

Precision

When considering data precision the researcher needs to be sure, for example, that data is collected systematically.

It might also be concerned with the extent to which people have direct knowledge of the behaviour and events you may be asking them to consider, describe or explain.

Replication

Replication is an important aspect of reliability since the ability to repeat a piece of research and gain the same (or very similar) results would suggest the data is reliable.

Reliability might also relate to the sources used (and their status) to collect data. For example, if another sociologist attempted to repeat my research "down the pub", would similar results be achieved?

There are numerous reasons as to why participant observation can **never** be exactly repeated. These range from the relatively mundane (a researcher may not have the **time** or **funding** to repeat a piece of research) to more serious problems such as the fact that a group may break-up after a piece of research has been completed or, more-significant perhaps, the composition of the group being studied changes over time (which may mean that a repeated piece of research would not be studying the same people under the same circumstances). For these reasons, participant observation rarely, if ever, aims to make generalisations about people's behaviour on the basis of the study of a relatively small (and probably unrepresentative) group.

Validity

Data is only useful if it actually measures what it **claims** to be measuring and, in this respect, the concept of validity refers to the extent to which the data we collect gives a true measurement / description of "social reality" (what is "really happening" in society).

Valid data is likely to have a depth and level of detail that gives the researcher a well-rounded picture of whatever they are studying.

Example

For example, when studying unemployment we can be reasonably sure the statistics are collected reliably, month-on-month, but we need to know how accurate (or "valid") a picture of unemployment they represent. For example, if we wanted to compare levels / rates of unemployment in our society between today and twenty years ago, could we use government statistics for this purpose?

Although such statistics are collected reliably, definitions of "unemployment" have changed over time - and since the definition has changed about 25 times over the past 15 years, such statistics are not valid for purposes of comparison (we are not, in technical terms, "comparing like with like").

Additionally, since such statistics do not use a definition of "unemployment" that involves counting everyone who wants to find a job (but can't) it's unlikely that they represent a true or valid picture of unemployment in Britain...

Observer Effect

The basic problem here is that of the extent to which people who know they are being studied change the way they "normally" behave. Is the observer seeing "normal behaviour" or does the mere fact the observer is present produce an **unknown level of change** (one that cannot be measured or quantified) in people's behaviour?

W.F. Whyte ("Street Corner Society") recognised - but never really solved - this problem. In a classic observation, the leader of the juvenile gang, "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."

Participant Observation Validity

Participant observers study people in their **natural environment**, gaining a **depth of insight** into behaviour that comes not simply from close, detailed, observation but also from the researcher's own experiences within the group being studied - a technique that provides **first hand insights** into **why** people behave as they do.

In addition, participant observation does **not** prejudge issues and events (in the way a questionnaire may, for example) and, for these reasons it is possible to argue that such a method provides data that has a **high level of validity**.