

# Four forms of participant observation: ethical issues



## **Introduction**

“ I have no great quickness of apprehension or wit...my power to follow a long and purely abstract of thought is very limited... (but) I am superior to the common run of men in noticing things which easily escape attention, and in observing them carefully” Charles Darwin, Preface to “ The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals”

Participant observation (PO) is one of the more fruitful methodological approaches to studying crowd behavior in the normal society. Obviously, PO includes two main parts, there are participating and observing. From the first moment people was born, it already been used. People use observation to watch the world around them and try to participant in it, in other words, people grow up in company with participating and observing. There are two main aspects in this assignment as well. The first aspect is to explain the context and identification of Participant Observation; in second aspect, I will focus on the ethics and reactivity of the four forms which is outlined in Norris' work. In this part, I will combine the fourfold categorisation which developed by Gill and Johnson (2002) with the four roles mentioned in Norris' work, and then conclude my own ideas about the ethics and reactivity in PO research.

## **What is Participant Observation?**

Participant Observation is a qualitative method with the roots in traditional ethnographic research. PO is “ the researcher attempts to participate fully in the lives and activities of subjects and thus become a member of their group, organization or community. This enables researchers to share their experiences by not merely observing what is happening but also feeling it ”

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(Gill and Johnson 2002: 144). From this identification, it is not difficult to find out that PO is not only a sample data collection as questionnaire; it is also an 'insider'. When researchers doing their task, as Delbridge and Kirkpatrick (1994: 37) notes that PO means 'immersion in the research setting, with the objective of sharing in peoples' lives while attempting to learn their symbolic world'. The main process of Participant Observation is to understand and feel people's subtle behavior in normal lives and 'attempt to learn their symbolic world'. So just making sense about some basic role of human behavior or observing those behaviors is not the key point of PO, PO process include more than just observe, it also has data collection and note-taking and so on.

To be honest, according to Bryman (1989): "many definitions of ethnography and participant observation are difficult to distinguish from each other". Speaking in theory, Ethnography is a holistic research. MaCall and Simmons define ethnography as: "...some amount of genuine social interaction in the field with the subjects of study, some direct observation of relevant event, some formal and a great deal of informal interviewing, some systematic counting, some collection of documents and artefacts; and open-endedness in the direction the study takes." So that is why I said that PO is a qualitative method with the roots in traditional ethnographic research in the beginning. In other words, PO is included in ethnography research. "Ethnography literally means 'a portrait a people'. An ethnography is a written descriptions of particular culture — the customs, beliefs, and behavior - based on information gathered through fieldwork" (Marvin Harris and Orna Johnson, 2000). So the ethnography is a multidisciplinary research

including 'intensive language and culture learning, intensive study of a single field or domain, and a blend of historical, observational, and interview methods.'

The four forms of PO outlined in Norris' work

Norris' work considered to some ethical considerations on Field-Work in the context of his own research on police culture.

### **Covert research vs. Overt research**

Covert research takes place in the situation that public are not aware of the people as a researcher and the researcher process, the researchers conceal themselves to the public. On the contrary, overt research take place in the situation that researchers reveal the true identity of themselves to the public and let the experimenters know the process and purpose of research even let them know the potential risk of research. However, the distinction between overt and covert research is not evident. There is a case provided by Glucksman (1994), who in the 1970s left her academic post to work on a factory assembly line to explore the reasons why feminism appeared not to be relevant to working-class women. In a sense, she was a covert observer, but her motives for the research were primarily political and she says that, at the time she was undertaking the research, she had no intention of writing the book that subsequently appeared and that was published under a pseudonym (Cavendish 1982). After the book's publication, it was treated as an example of ethnographic research.

Every research method has the merit and demerit, so the cover and overt research are not exception. The merits and demerits of both forms conclude three main points: reactivity, ethics and access.

For covert research, one of the merit aspects is the reactivity is not a problem, using the covert research could reduce the reactivity of experiments, because they are not aware of being researched. The less reactivity research got, the more validity core data gathered. The other merit aspect of covert research is easy to access. Because of the stealth of PO practice, people do not know “ the person conducting the study is a researcher. Therefore, they are less likely to adjust their behavior because of the researcher’s presence.” (Alan Bryman and Emma Bell, 2003: 320). The demerit of covert research is the ethical problems. The process of research is undercover; some researches focus on some privacy of people’s behavior, so research gathered data without the experiment granted during the research. The experimenters do not get the right of “ informed consent” as well, the ethical problems such as violation of the principle of privacy happened inevitably.

For the overt research, ethics is a prominent merit compared with covert research. Using overt research could give the experiment sufficient right to understanding the purpose and process of the study and the potential risk they possibly faced with. But the demerit of overt research also very obvious. The access can be arduous and timely even may not be granted; the high degree of reactivity to the research is not good to the validity of data collection.

### **Characteristics of Four Forms of PO**

According to Norris' work, Van Mannen divided the PO process into four parts, there are ' SPY', ' VOYEUR', ' FAN', ' MEMBER'. The divide of those four forms depend on two dimensions, there are active and passive. Actually, those four roles in Norris' work developed by Van Mannen on PO research is the some thing as Gill and Johnson's fourfold categorization of PO, there are complete participant, complete observer, observer as participant and participant as observer.

' SPY' is identified by Van Mannen as ' active and covert' type. It is the same meaning as complete participant in Gill and Johnson's fourfold categorization. The complete participant role " sees you as the researcher attempting to become a member of the group in which you are performing research" (Saunders, M. et al., 2008). The research concealed their true identity and purpose of research to public. During the research process, researcher will participant in the group and gain trust from he or her colleagues and make friend with experimenters. Doing like that could reduce the researchers' access without too many problems of gather core data and take notes more easily. As Norris said: " when observer excused himself to the toilet, hurriedly to scribble down notes, he felt like the ' Spy'."

' VOYEUR' is a ' covert and passive' type which is mentioned in Norris' work, it is a complete observer role as well. Norris said in his work: " When observer deliberately placed in a position to overhear private conversations between officers, observer would feel like a ' Voyeur'." The complete observer is the role that researcher have any communication with people. For example, one observer wants to research the proportion of green bag

using when people shopping in the supermarket. What he or she would do is just one thing: having a seat near the exit of the supermarket or check-out counter, gather the number of people who was carrying a green bag in hand when they finished shopping, and then written a record down on the notebook. In this observing process, no participant taken by the researchers and no reactivity reflected by the customers.

'FAN' is an 'overt and passive' type defined by Van Mannen, Gill and Johnson called this type as observer as participant role. In this role, the researchers seems like an interviewer. As Norris said: "When observer was attending incidents on the street, passively listening and watching, he was the 'Fan'." this role has less participant and more observation. The researchers reveal themselves to public; people are not remained under cover.

'MEMBER' is identified by Van Mannen as 'active and overt' type. It was called participant as observer in Gill and Johnson's findings. The participant as observer is similar as complete participant, just the complete participant is the cover role, and 'MEMBER' is the overt role. In this role the person reveals his or her purpose as a researcher. So in this process, the researchers should make more efforts on gaining trust from their colleagues and take part in the group actively. In Norris' work, "when I was left guarding a prisoner, introduced as a fellow police officer, or helped in the arrest of a violent and disturbed drug-user, I was, to all intents and purpose, cast in the role of a police officer." This role may be leads to another advantage which concluded in Robson's study: "this is that key informants

are likely to adopt a perspective of analytic reflection on the processes in which they are involved.” (Robson, 2002)

According to the analysis of those four roles outlined in Norris’ work, I concluded that it has no clear boundary among those four roles. The distinction of those four roles depends on the degree of participating and observing. So it is more likely to be a subjective method that could be influenced by some factors such as the individuals’ willingness or extent of reactivity and so on.

### **Reactivity Principles in four forms**

It has different degrees of reactivity in different roles. “SPY” type and “VOYEUR” type both are covert research, so they have a low extent of reactivity in those two types. On the other side as well as the overt research role- “MEMBER” and “FAN”, a high degree of reactivity took place. As it is mentioned before, the low degree of reactivity took place, the high validity of core data gathered. Reactivity presents a threat to the internal and external validity of PO research.

In covert research, the experimenters are unaware of the research process, so their behavior which researchers want to observe is the unvarnished behavior; this is a key point of gathering valid data by the researchers. In overt research, this advantage which in covert research is disappeared. When the experimenters know the researcher’s true identity and process of research, they will raise the level of alertness on the researcher and then make a decision. Even if the experiment grants to a participant, their behavior will not be the same as the unvarnished behavior.



## **Ethical principles in four forms**

There are a number of ethical problems should to be considered during the process of one research. Every research methods will meet the ethical problems including the PO. In Norris' work, three main principle of ethics of the research role outlined: informed consent, the invasion of privacy and the trust and deceit.

### **Informed Consent**

The doctrine of informed consent is the general principle has been used to justify taking an ethical view of the behavior of social research. Informed consent is a legal right which given to the person who was invited to participate in social research activities. The right include the experimenters should be told by the researcher about a clear appreciation and understanding of the facts, implications and future consequences of the research, including the potential risks within this research. After they know the whole thing, they also have the right to decide whether they will cooperate or participant.

“ The voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential. This means that the person concerned should have legal captivity to give consent, should be so situated as to exercise free power of choice, without the intervention of any elements of force, fraud, deceit, duress, overteaching or any other ulterior form of constraint or conversion; and should have sufficient knowledge and comprehension of the elements of the subject matter involved as to enable him to make an understanding and enlightened decision.” (Homan, 1991: 69; see also Katz et al., 1972: 292-306). For instance, the informed consent always be used in the medical experiments.

Before a surgery or other kinds of medical treatments to be taken, the signed consent form is required. The patients must understand the potential risks of the treatment and decide whether they will grant or not.

### **The invasion of privacy**

Bulmer has written: "To insinuate oneself into a particular setting on false pretences in order to gather material for research violates the rights of the individual to be let alone, to control his personal space, and information about himself" (1982: 219). People have the right of protecting their own privacies; infringing people's privacy is an unethical act. But using covert research in the process of PO, the invasion of privacy is not so easy to be avoided. For example, if a researcher wants to investigate people's anomaly behaviors in normal lives, using covert research is necessary. Because people's abnormal behaviors usually are private, covert things. No one would like to share and discuss their anomaly behaviors in public. And we couldn't design an experiment to let people show their anomaly behaviors, so the researcher must use the covert research to observe this object. In this process, the people who were observed by the researcher are in the situation that their privacy is being infringed.

But we also have measures to reduce this ethical problem. Because the definition of privacy is dependent on individuals, someone's mind is not open enough to share their privacy with others, but someone is not. In other words, in modern society, privacy becomes a commodity which could be sold and bought. This ethical problem also could be reduced by changing the covert situation to the overt situation as well. Researchers should make friends with the experiment and gain their trust, and then tell them about the

researcher's true identity and purpose of the research and get their permit. Although it is likely to be a little time consuming, but it is a good way to access in the settings and practice PO research without guilty.

### **The trust and deceit**

In theory, trust and deceit is the opposite side in social activities, but they are not the absolute opposite side in social research, especially in PO research. Although the researchers have the obligation to tell the unvarnished truth to the experiment, but think about this question: " Do doctors tell the truth to dying patients?" Sometimes the truth-telling has not benefits to the healthy and safety in terms of experimenters rather than access and data collection in terms of researchers.

### **Conclusion**

Participant Observation as a qualitative method plays an important role in society. Since crowd behavior takes place in a context of social activities, PO may involve having to take sides to gather data. In this assignment, the distinction of ethnography and PO research is not distinctness. They have a closed relationship between each other. After introduction of ethnography and PO, the next session in this assignment as well as the main part focuses on the four roles outlined in Norris' work. Norris analyses some ethical considerations on field- work with police by using the four forms of PO research. The roles divided according to the covert and overt research, covert research and overt research are the basic approaches in PO. So as to explaining the four roles more comprehensive, the Gill and Johnson's findings are used as well. In the second session, the reactivity and ethics as the main two aspects are anglicized in detail by several points from different angles.

Participant Observation perhaps is the earliest method in the world.

However, the participant observation was not lost its own glory because of its ancient. Although the modern technology and research methodology develop in a high speed, Participant Observation is still the most basic commonly method which could continue being used in the future.

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