

# Labelling in schools

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Participant observation is where the researcher takes part in the event that they are observing or the everyday life of the group whilst observing it. There are two different types of participant observation. Firstly, overt observation is when the researcher firstly makes all the participants aware that they are being studied and makes sure they give their permission before the observation takes place. This makes their research ethically sound, however observer effect can occur which is where people behave differently because they are being observed, giving unreliable results. The other type of participant observation is covert studies. This means participants do not know they are being watched. This means they are more likely to behave like they normally would, giving valid results, however raises ethical concerns such as the right to withdraw and deception. This essay will look at the strengths and limitations of participant observation for the study of labelling in schools. Firstly, strength of participant observation is that results are usually valid. Rather than getting a participant to fill out a questionnaire when there is no real way of telling if they are giving accurate answers, participant observation can however provide high amounts of qualitative data and the researcher can put his findings into great detail. By observing ethnic minorities and teacher/student interaction towards them, the sociologist can gain understanding of their viewpoints and actions. Studies that take place in a natural setting e. g. a classroom raise validity as the students are more likely to behave in their normal manner, rather than if they were taken into a lab, they may react and treat ethnic minorities differently to conform to social accepted views. Validity is a major strength of participant observation as if results are true to life, they can be generalised

and used objectively. Another strength of participant observation is Insight. Sociologists refer to this as 'verstehen' meaning empathy. Participant observation allows the researcher to empathise through personal experience. Gaining an insight into people's thoughts, actions and values means that the researcher can begin to properly understand what makes them behave the way they do and why. Participant observation enables the researcher to gain new information which could go against a hypothesis. E. g. by observing how ethnic minorities respond to labelling and negative treatment by teachers can create unique and true to life results and shows that participant observation is a good way to measure labelling in schools as researchers can gain a better insight into the lives and thoughts of their candidates to provide more realistic and accurate results. Flexibility is also another good point about participant observation. Rather than starting with a fixed hypothesis and coming up with pre set questions like in an interview or questionnaire, participant observation allows the researcher to enter the environment with an open mind, and therefore are less likely to make bias judgements to their hypothesis. In a study of labelling, through directly observing the participants interaction with each other and especially towards ethnic minorities, it is easier to make judgements as the researcher is open minded and not looking for one particular interaction. Sometimes participant observation may be the only method for studying certain groups. Participant observation enables the sociologist to build a relationship with the group. For example if a researcher was observing a class of children they might pretend to be a teacher to gain the pupils trust and make them feel comfortable to behave in their normal manner, this means the researcher will blend into

their natural environment and not cause as much change in their actions than if the study was overt. However, participant observation also carries limitations. Firstly, when observing, the researcher would have to write or jot down notes in private in order to not attract any attention from the participants. This means that participant observation may rely on memory or interpretation of the researcher which may just be their opinion and not agreed with anybody else. This is a limitation as it shows that results are not objective, and that it depends upon the researcher's ability to take accurate and detailed notes and how they interpret what they see. This occurred for Hammersley who found himself writing his notes on the back of a newspaper because he was observing a classroom covertly. Secondly, Students are seen as very vulnerable and this limits the researcher from carrying out a covert study, where the most accurate results are produced. Deceiving the children and not giving them the right to withdraw could cause problems with parents and upset them to know that they were being unknowingly observed. If the study is however overt, students may behave differently and the classroom may not be seen as it normally would be if the researcher were not present. This means results are not always accurate especially from overt studies where the participants are told they are being watched which may cause them to behave artificially to what they normally would. Another limitation comes from Delamont (1984) who does not believe that pre-deciding categories for behaviour and limiting how results can be recorded helps to conclude about labelling in schools. He said that it ignores the meanings of why teachers and pupils treat ethnic minorities the way that they do, and puts everybody into a category which may not necessarily be the case. It

ignores what effect it has on the labelled student also, which means results are not accurate and are very vague. Lastly, the Hawthorne effect has a major impact on the results of participant observation. As most classroom studies have to be overt to protect the student's identity, there are not many roles that the researcher could adopt to blend into the environment and go unnoticed. This means that it is very likely that as the teacher and the students know they are being watched, they will act differently to their normal behaviour. Ronald King (1984) tried to blend into the background in an infant school by spending short periods of time in the classroom before carrying out his observation so that the children got used to his presence. However, it is not always that easy and even teachers may act differently in the presence of the researcher. Teachers are seen as performers, so when they are being observed they try their best to live up to the role of the perfect teacher, not necessarily behaving towards the students the way they normally would if the researcher wasn't there, this means that with overt studies, results are always going to be less valid due mainly to the Hawthorne effect that naturally occurs. To conclude, participant observation is a good way to gain detailed accurate results and if covert, can produce valid results and a great understanding as to why in schools labelling occurs and how ethnic minorities are labelled by their fellow students and also teachers. However, many limitations point to the fact that because of ethical issues due to the young age of the participants, studies most likely have

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