

Examine the  
problems sociologists  
may find when using  
participant  
observations in...

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All sociological research methods involve observation, however, participant observations is defined by when the researcher themselves participates in the activities of those he or she is observing and studying. Hughes (1976), describes participant observation as, ' When the researcher becomes part of a daily round, learning languages and meanings, rules of impersonal, relations... and in short, living the life of the people under study. Participant observations come in two forms, overt participant observations, in which, the researcher informs the group's members about the purpose of the research and other details, and there is covert participant observations, in which, the researcher joins the group without informing the members, the research is carried out secretly and the members of the group are unaware they are being studied. This in itself can raise many issues. When carrying out participant observations, whether covert or overt, there are many problems that can occur, including time, cost, bias, replication, generalisation, validity, reliability and ethical issues. An important aspect when carrying out participant observations is that the researcher must observe people in their natural settings, the researcher must not disturb that setting. In Parker's study (View from the Boys 1974), of Liverpool adolescents, the researcher persuaded the boys to not commit a crime at the time, but did not stop them committing the crime ideally. This brings about many issues. For example, in participant observations, the researcher, as stated, should just observe. Parker broke this rule by convincing the boys not to steal at that moment. His intervention changed the behaviour of the boys, therefore any results can be said to be inaccurate as the group was not behaving as it would have if Parker was not present. Additionally, it raises ethical issues. He knew the

boys would commit the crime later on, but because of his research, he couldn't call the police or punish them, therefore to what extent did the means of the study justify the means. Other disadvantage of using participant observations is the time, money and personal cost it entails. Participant observations can be done over a number of months, during which the researcher is usually cut off from the support of their family and friends, giving them personal stress. It can also be incredibly dangerous, for example, in Harlambos (1994), study, he was, ' threatened with guns on more than one occasions during his research into African-American music on the south side of Chicago'. Another disadvantage of conducting participant observations is the fact that it reduces objectivity. In order for any results to be considered valid, the results must remain completely objective, with no bias from the researcher. This is not always the case in participant observations. The researcher has to record their observations as they see it, which this in itself could bias the results. The researcher is viewing the study through their viewpoint, they want to prove their hypothesis, and so they could see what they want to see, instead of observing the truth of the situation. Also, there is no guarantee the researcher will remain completely objective, when recording results they may be subjective to their own view on the subject and not give an objective viewpoint. Furthermore, in the group, several things will be happening at the same time, which makes it difficult for the researcher to observe everyone at the group at the same time. This then can lead to problems such as the researcher won't be able to record everything they have seen, and if they don't, then they could miss significant evidence, which may be important to their study. ' The researcher

may find they have become so involved in their participation they cease to accurately record data.'[4] (Throll 2005) Gaining entrance into the group provides many problems also. In terms of gender, one sex cannot study certain topics, such as a male sociologist cannot change gender to female in order to observe a group of nuns. Also, when observing youths, it is usually doubtful to use a grown researcher, the researcher would have to be of similar age to the youths, in which they may not be qualified enough. Lastly, in accessing the group, there are problems. Certain groups, such as the Freemasons, only allow member to join by invitation, making it hard to gain an insight into the group. Also when observing professionals such as doctors or lawyers, you need certain qualifications, so a sociologist would not be able to join these groups. Gotherline (1996), states that, ' When gaining access into groups, whether covertly or overtly, researchers have to take time into preparing access into the group, in which by the end, the means might not have justified the ends.'[5] Participant observational studies are hard to replicate and results are hard to generalise. Firstly, the results are derived from one group, just a small sample; it is not a representative sample. As a result, researchers cannot say that the results from that particular group can be generalised to other social groups around the world, the studies results is limited to itself, any results found can just be stated as results from that group. This leads onto problems of replication. Replication is essential in a sociological study, as it allows the results to be fully accurate, the same or another researcher can repeat the study again,, and if the results from the first study are indeed accurate, then same findings will be found when the study is replicated. This cannot be done with participant observations, as it

cannot be replicated under the same conditions, there are no fixed procedures, things happen and then observer just follows, therefore these random events won't occur again. An example is given from Robert Redfield's study (1930), in the village of Tepoztlan in Mexico. He found a close-knit society in which everyone was cooperative and everyone had a strong sense of belonging. When Oscar Lewis conducted the study seventeen years later in the same village, he found society was, 'divided by fear, envy and distrust.' [6] These differences show that results from participant observations are not the same all the time. In conclusion, the primary method of participant observations brings with it several disadvantages. Its lack of replicability, affects the reliability of results, the risks involved can be dangerous as illustrated by Harlambos Chicago study, while also affecting the researchers personal lives as they have to sacrifice important aspects such as family and friend contact and lead a, 'double life', giving up their own time and money, in which the results may not even be accurate. Furthermore, results cannot be generalised, so therefore how exactly does the results help society, if the results can only be put into affect when talking about just that one study. Besides, when using covert observations, you are, 'infringing on basic human rights' (Tony Bilton 2003), [7], by invading the groups privacy. What right has the researcher got to lie to the group and its members just for their study? Zeiller (1956), states that, 'The researchers decision to use the sociological method of participant observations is not always a wise one. In the end, the researcher must ask themselves if the means really do justify the means, or would the study demonstrate more valid results if another primary sociological method was used? "