

Participation observation research method: analysis



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Participation Observation Research

Participant observation is a method of collecting qualitative data in social research. This method involves the immersion of the researcher in the subject matter so that it can be observed in its natural setting. It involves variable levels of involvement of the researcher on a continuum ranging from passive (observation) to active (participation).

The distinction between participation and observation is based on the closeness of the researcher to the subject matter with observation involving external evaluation and recording of events without the interference of the researcher whilst participation represents an internal view in which the researcher records views from within the group by acting, overtly or covertly, as a member in order to experience the actuality of the events. For example, in Humphreys study of homosexuals, he played an active role by acting as lookout for the police whilst the homosexual encounter occurred in public toilets (Humphreys, 1970). Although Humphreys was observing events and gathering data, he was 'inside' the situation that occurred thus his presence had some impact on events; things would not have occurred exactly as they did had he not been present. Examples of a passive role include researchers who observe things 'as they happen' but with no influence at all on the events that unfold, other than by their mere presence. For example, Patton describes researchers who were recording the reactions of the audience to Billy Graham's evangelical preaching (Patton, 2002). Their role was to record events without taking any part in the proceedings, although two researchers were so influenced by his preaching that they put aside their notes and joined the congregation.

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One of the advantages of participant observation is its ability to facilitate the collection of 'rich' information that is frequently not available from other sources (Babbie, 1995). As such, it can be used to supplement, inform or contradict theorised research and it can greatly enhance the available knowledge on a subject as a result. It can be used either as a preliminary step in a research study by which the researcher observes events 'as they occur' in order to formulate a hypothesis for further investigation or it can be used at a more advanced stage of the research in order to test a hypothesis formed on the basis of theoretical research (Patton, 2002).

It is believed to elicit 'real' and 'genuine' information that has not been filtered or amended by the research participants as can occur in relation to interview or questionnaire data and, as such, provides unique insights into the subjective viewpoint of the participants in the study. With observation, participants may not realise that they are being watched so they do not moderate their behaviour in any way thus the data gathered in unadulterated. It also provides richer information than interviews or questionnaires because it can take into account non-verbal interaction and behaviour (Berg, 2003). As such, it can be a valuable method of researching the influence of structures or events on individuals and groups. There is also the possibility that unexpected and unanticipated events will occur during the course of the observation hence its value in accessing unique data (Berg, 2003).

Equally, even with more active participation from the researcher, the subjects of the research may not realise that they are being observed as it is not uncommon for the researcher to obscure their identity by posing as a

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member of the group or as someone who would naturally come into contact with them. For example, in studies of the way in which mentally ill patients are treated by psychiatrists and others in the medical profession, researchers were admitted into mental health facilities by posing as patients so that they could experience the reality of life within such an environment, something that would not have been possible had they announced their presence and their purpose (Winstein, 1982). As this example demonstrates, participant observation can be a way to access information from those who might be reluctant to give interviews or who would present a policy-driven view of the subject (Bogdan, 1972). Sometimes, the only way to get around such obstacles is to gain surreptitious access to the environment in order to experience directly what is happening (Spradley, 1997).

There are limitations to this research method. It can be time-consuming, both in terms of the actual observations and in preparing and analysing the large amount of resultant data. This may make it a less cost-effective means of conducting research (Jorgenson, 1993). A second limitation is that it tends to involve the observation of only a few examples of a particular subject, behaviour or event thus there is a limit to the extent to which the findings are amenable to generalisation (Spradley, 1997). A further criticism that can be levelled against participant observation is that it is inherently subjective as it not only focuses on a single (or limited number) of particular observations but that the recording of the resultant data is subject to the interpretation of the researcher (Jorgenson, 1993). Accordingly, there is a possibility of conscious or unconscious bias which is inconsistent with its appearance, particularly in relation to observation rather than participation,

of an objective and scientific research method. This criticism is furthered in relation to participation because the researcher plays some kind of role in events that unfold thus is not a mere passive recipient of information but is someone who contributes to the shape and content of the resultant data (Spradley, 1993). The final criticism of participant observation that needs to be addressed is particularly pertinent to participation by the researcher and that is issues of deception of the research subjects and the ethical issues that therefore arise. This was demonstrated in Humphrey's research with homosexuals as he posed as a member of their community thus accessing data that would not have been available without this deception. The practice of deception on research subjects is one that needs to be considered carefully when weighing the balance of the strengths and limitations of this research method (Spradley, 1993).

Word Count: 1000 Words

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