

Participant observation



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Throughout “ Participant Observation” the author explains the importance of participant observation and the trials faced by many ethnographers. Dewalt & Dewalt expound upon this by stating what basic elements and attitudes are needed to do participant research effectively. This reading shows how observers face ethical dilemmas, gender disadvantages, family and safety issues, and, most importantly, limits to participation. How far are they willing to go to gather information?

Overall, the main point that Dewalt & Dewalt present is that despite it’s obstacles, participant observation is effective in providing the opportunity for new researchers to begin to anticipate problems, identify alternative strategies and learn more about other people and their cultures. Summary of argument Throughout the reading, I was continually interested in how much science and finesse goes in to this sort of observing. The observer takes part in the daily activities, rituals, activities, interactions and events of people being studied.

The first argument made is that participant observation is important. “ Participant observation is thus both a data collection and an analytical tool. ” (pg. 264) According to the reading, observing can enhance the quality of the data and the quality of the interpretation. The second argument made is that “ observations are not data unless they are recorded in some fashion for further analysis” (pg 271) The paper really emphasizes the importance of detailed field notes.

Memory is fleeting and although it is almost impossible to completely eliminate biases, field notes help to provide more accurate data. The third argument is that although sometimes biased, participant observation is vital

to understanding different cultures, genders, and lifestyles. At first it says, “ The effects of gender, sexuality, and the field worker’s family situation suggest , it’s quite apparent that personal attributes can substantially affect participant observations in field research. (pg 287)

But it goes on to say that participant observation “ laid the groundwork for much of the theoretical development autochthonous to anthropology. “ (pg 289) Reaction/response Its hard to say whether I disagreed or agreed with the reading because on the surface it seemed like a simple and interesting informative paper. Upon closer examination, though, I found undertones of persuasive arguments. These arguments presented themselves in the form of claims proven by various texts and studies referenced throughout.