

Sociology Factsheet



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Participant Observation 1 : Covert Participant Observation

This Factsheet summarises the use of covert participant observation and the advantages and disadvantages of using this type of observation in sociological research.

What is participant observation?

All social research, according to Hammersley and Atkinson, takes the form of participant observation: 'We involve ourselves in everyday (and not so everyday) situations, we look at, and listen to what is happening around us. We try to make sense of what is going on, so that we may act appropriately.'

Activity: Think of the times when you have been part of a group and observed other people's behaviour. In these situations you were a participant observer.

Participant observation refers to a form of sociological research methodology in which the researcher takes on the role of observer in a social situation. The aim is to experience events in the manner in which the participants under study also experience these events. Sociologists who employ participant observation as a research tool aim to discover the nature of social reality by understanding the actor's perception, understanding and interpretation of that social world. Whilst observing and experiencing as a participant, the sociologist must retain a level of objectivity in order to understand, analyse and explain the social world under study.

The kind of data produced by participant observation is qualitative; it is a picture of the world through the eyes of people themselves, whether they be religious sect members, in a delinquent gang or school pupils.

Participant observation is the main research method favoured by interpretivists

History of participant observation

Participant Observation was first developed outside sociology by anthropologists who studied the variety of different societies and cultures in the world and began to live in the societies they were interested in. One of the most famous examples of this approach is Malinowski's research in the South Pacific Trobriand Islands where he lived during the First World War. Later in the 1920's and 1930's in America sociologists in Chicago borrowed this approach. They studied the lives of different types of people including tramps, gang members and the rich:

"They concentrated on observation of people in their "natural habitat," watching, listening, talking, taking lifehistories and recording." (P. McNeill, "Research Methods", 2nd. ed. Tavistock, 1990)

Participant observation gave researchers a method to view the world through the eyes of other people. For example, in his famous book, "Asylums" Erving Goffman worked in a mental hospital and carried out participant observation by participating in the lives of the patients and talking to them.

What types of participant observation are there?

There are two main types of participant observation: **Covert participant observation and overt participant observation**

This Factsheet will focus on **covert participant observation** and look at the advantages and disadvantages of this form of Participant Observation

What is Covert Participant Observation?

This type of participant observation involves the researcher joining and researching a group without informing the members of that group. In this respect, the research is carried-out secretly (covertly), since as far as the other members of the group are aware, the researcher has simply joined (or been admitted to) the group to participate in their usual activities.

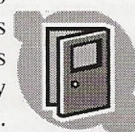


Exam Hint:- Make sure you know the characteristics of covert participant observation. Exam questions could ask you to explain covert observation and identify the advantages and/or disadvantages of this type of observation.

Advantages of Covert Participant Observation

1. Access

The researcher may gain access to social groups who would otherwise not consent to being studied. This is a useful strength of this method since it allows sociologists to investigate behaviour that is normally hidden from both researchers and the wider public. Using covert participation, therefore, a researcher can study illegal behaviour (a criminal gang, for example), deviant behaviour and various forms of "secret" behaviour.



Example

Laud Humphries' study of male homosexuals in America ("Tea Room Trade").

2. Observer Effects

If people know they are being observed their behaviour may change. The potential problem of an observer effect is avoided with covert observation because the group are unaware they're being studied. The researcher, therefore, can safely assume they really are observing 'normal behaviour'

3. Personal Experience

By becoming a member of a group the researcher can personally experience incidents and events and, by so doing, arrive at a richer, more detailed account of the factors that promote and motive people's behaviour.

Personal involvement means the researcher is able to gather data which, as an interviewer for example, they might not have thought to collect. In addition, the covert observer may come, through personal experience, to understand the meanings and motivations within a group that explain why people behave in certain ways.

Disadvantages of Covert Participant Observation

1. Gaining access to the group in the first place may be a potential problem

Getting into a group may not be a simple matter since to pass as an ordinary group member the researcher must share the characteristics of the people they are studying.

The researcher may not, for one reason or another, be able to join a group covertly for reasons such as:

- **Gender:** A man could not covertly study a group of nuns.
- **Age:** A middle-aged researcher could not join a gang of youths.
- **Access:** Many groups (such as Freemasons, for example) only allow people to join their group by invitation. In addition, various professional occupations (doctors, teachers, lawyers and so forth) require particular qualifications and a “non-qualified” sociologist would not be able to join such groups covertly.

Even where the problem of entrance has been overcome, a covert researcher will not have access to all levels of a group (especially hierarchical groups such as a business organisation, for example). Thus, in a factory it may be possible to join the group as a shop-floor worker (giving good access to people at this level), but someone employed in this capacity would not have access to boardroom discussions and decision-making. However, sociologists have successfully solved this problem on occasions.

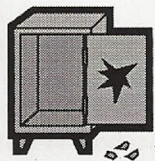
Howard Parker's (“A View From The Boys”) solution to the “access problem” came through having met members of the gang he wanted to study through a country holiday centre for deprived children. Parker's appearance (“boozy, suitably dressed and ungroomed and knowing about theft behaviour and sexual exploits” as he described himself) helped him to gain acceptance by the gang he was studying.

2. “Going Native”

One of the major problems covert participant observers have is that of separating their role of participant from that of observer, therefore ceasing to observe the group objectively.

The covert researcher is trying to be “two different people” at the same time and it may be difficult to remember which role is appropriate at which time. The researcher may become so involved in their participation they cease to accurately record data.

Howard Parker (“A View From The Boys”) frequently found himself in the position of engaging in criminal activity while in the gang (receiving stolen goods, for example). He argued that such involvement was necessary (although not totally ethical), if he was to maintain the trust, respect and friendship of the people he was researching.



3. Observer effect

Since the group under observation are not aware they are being researched, the problem of an observer effect is avoided.

The researcher, therefore, can safely assume they really are observing people's “normal behaviour”. However, although this is a clear strength of the method, it is not without its problems.

As Howard Parker (“A View From The Boys”) discovered, his involvement with a juvenile gang (although covert) changed their behaviour not because of his presence in the group but because of his actions as part of the group. Parker, for example, frequently tried to stop gang members from stealing cars and he also provided legal advice to gang members charged with theft. The question here, therefore, was the extent to which his behaviour changed the behaviour of the group. Is the data collected from such observations therefore valid?

4. Recording Data

Recording information will be difficult because the researcher cannot simply take notes or record conversations openly. The ability to question people about what they are doing and why they are doing it will not be easy, since such behaviour is unlikely to be part of people's “normal”, everyday, behaviour. The researcher who did such things would be very quickly exposed.



One way around this problem is to keep a field diary, where the researcher writes down observations in quiet moments at the end of the day. While this is a solution, it does mean that the researcher must remember things clearly and accurately.

5. Size of study

Although participant observation can reveal a lot of detailed information about a group of people, most participant observation is restricted to fairly small-scale studies carried out over a long period and the group being studied is unlikely to be representative of any other social group.

6. Generalization

It's also unlikely a researcher will be able to generalise their findings from one study to the next (for example, is Goffman's study of a mental asylum applicable to all mental institutions?).

7. Reliability

Participant observation (whether overt or covert) is not the most reliable research method. Such studies are, by their very nature, impossible to repeat and the data they produce is simply the opinion of one observer.

Data can be considered broadly reliable if the same results (or broadly similar) can be gained by different researchers asking the same questions to the same (or broadly similar) people.

There are numerous reasons as to why participant observation can never be exactly repeated. These range from the relatively mundane (a researcher may not have the time or funding to repeat a piece of research) to more serious problems such as the fact that a group may break-up after a piece of research has been completed or, more-significant perhaps, the composition of the group being studied changes over time (which may mean that a repeated piece of research would not be studying the same people under the same circumstances).

8. Validity

Data is only useful if it actually measures what it claims to be measuring and, in this respect, the concept of validity refers to the extent to which the data we collect gives a true measurement / description of “social reality” (what is “really happening” in society). Valid data is likely to have a depth and level of detail that gives the researcher a well-rounded picture of whatever they are studying.

If the researcher can prevent their presence from altering behaviour then the data should also be valid: a true or “unpolluted” picture of behaviour.

For some types of research there may be no good alternative to covert participant observation. Certain deviant groups or behaviour would not be possible to study using any other method.

Exam Hint: Make sure that you can explain the difference between validity and reliability

9. Skill and commitment

Participant observation requires a great deal of skill and commitment from the researcher. The success or failure of the research will hinge on such factors as the ability to fit-in with the people being studied and the ability to communicate with groups members on their level and terms. It will also, at different times, require tact, clear and careful observation, the ability to separate the role of participant from that of observer etc.

10. Subjectivity

The data collected is based on the subjective impressions of the observer.

Therefore a piece of research may simply be the subjective interpretation of the researcher about "what was happening within the group" rather than the reality of the situation from the group's point of view.

11. Risk of danger

In order to be accepted by the group, the researcher may need to become involved in activity which they wouldn't normally be involved with.

The plea that "I was only a participant observer doing sociological research" is unlikely to be accepted since by accompanying someone in the commission of a crime you are an accessory to that crime - which is a criminal offence.

12. Ethics

There are ethical problems involved in covert observation, ranging from the fact that by spying on people you are not being entirely honest with them (you are, in a sense, exploiting them for your own ends) to the problem of suddenly ceasing to involve yourself in the lives of people who may have grown to like, trust and depend on you.

For **Parker** ("A View From The Boys") an ethical problem was the extent to which researchers should deceive people by pretending to be "one of them". Parker, for example, chose to withhold some data from publication and discussed publication of certain information with the gang members (he left the final decision over some matters with them). His main concern was that his research did not harm gang members. This may resolve ethical problems, but raises the problem of not being able to give a full account of the behaviour studied.

This means that for covert observation to be effective, participants cannot give their informed consent.

A further important ethical issue concerns the question of working covertly. Whatever its advantages, as Schatzman and Strauss (1973) argue, participant observation with a hidden identity does raise ethical problems that are not easily resolved. It may be argued that if in adopting this research tactic we gain new insights; that the end justifies the means. However, the ethical problem of recording individuals without their knowledge remains. The moral dilemma is not necessarily overcome by making known one's presence as a researcher to those who are the subjects of the study. As Hargreaves (1967) points out, a certain amount of deception is inevitable in participant observation; it was when the teachers appeared to treat him as a friend rather than a researcher that the most significant things were said.

Exam Hint: It is important to know the advantages and disadvantages associated with covert participant observation. You may be asked in the exam to identify advantages and/or disadvantages of 'covertly observing members of a social group'

Examples of Covert participant observation

Rubenstein (1973) went almost to the point of becoming a policeman - he worked as a crime reporter, completed the police training and rode as an "armed observer" in patrol cars in Philadelphia. His *City Police* is an insider's view of backstage police behaviour. In microscopic detail, Rubenstein takes us into the policeman's world. Although he never directly spells out his own involvement in encounters - did he ever draw or use his gun? Did he ever have to fight? Did he assist in arrests? - He clearly got inside the skins of the patrolmen. The information he collected on violence and corruption could only have been gained by a trained observer who was accepted by the policemen. The complete observer role is a fiction because he or she is always part of the situation and because distancing oneself from the police role - say by explaining at each encounter to the citizen the reason for an academic's presence - may destroy precisely what he wished to observe.



Asylums 1968 Goffman worked in an asylum for the mentally ill as an Assistant Athletic Director. His research was mainly covert (the inmates and hospital staff did not know he was doing research). His research attempted to discover the "unofficial reality" of mental institutions, to: a. Answer the question "what is really going on here?" b. To discover the "sense" in a place of insanity and, in particular, to analyse how patients coped with both their **labelling** as "mentally ill" and the "abnormal social situation" in which they found themselves.

Jason Ditton's research (1975) into "fiddling and pilfering" in a bakery would not have been possible had he revealed that he was a sociologist

Exam Hint: In order to gain AO2 marks in the exam, you need to be able to use studies that support covert research.

Example Exam Questions

Suggest three disadvantages of 'covertly observing members of a social group'

Two marks would be awarded for each of three appropriate disadvantages, such as:

- Lack of informed consent;
- Recording behaviour is more difficult;
- Difficult to maintain covert role (going native)
- Cannot ask direct questions;
- Greater physical danger.
- Access
- Reliability

Examiner's comments

Generally answered very well .Some candidates lost marks by making reference to participant observation in general, or by stating ethical problems but without qualification or elaboration.

Some candidates answered the question with reference to overt instead of covert participant observation. This error clearly cost them most or all of the marks.

Examine the problems that some sociologists may find when using covert participant observation in their research.**Low band answers would include:**

Answer may include some weak descriptive points about covert participant observation in social research.

Middle band answers

Answers will show reasonable knowledge and understanding of some of the characteristics of, and problems with, covert participant observation. Interpretation may be limited and not explicitly linked to the demands of the question; for instance, answers may be diverted into often lengthy descriptive accounts of particular examples of studies that have used covert participant observation.

There may be some limited explicit analysis or evaluation;

Top band answers

Answers in this band will display sound, conceptually detailed knowledge and understanding of sociological material relating to the problems of using covert participant observation in sociological research. This will be accurately and sensitively interpreted to meet the demands of the question. The candidate will show the ability to organise material and analyse and/or evaluate so as to produce a coherent and relevant answer. Evaluation will be more closely related to the reasons identified in the answer. It is not a requirement of this question to outline the strengths of covert participant observation but references to the strengths of participant observation could be applied in an evaluative way.

Examiners comments

Many candidates produced at least a sound response to this part-question and some generated very high quality answers. Top-marked responses had a clear focus on the problems of covert participant observation but used their knowledge of the strengths of this technique as an evaluative counterpoint.

High quality answers also tended to be based on comprehensive knowledge of covert participant observation, the effective application of studies and a developed explanation of why certain characteristics could be considered as problematic.

Middle-band answers tended to be less well-developed, more limited in range and sometimes offered a prepared .advantages and disadvantages. response. Some candidates had so little knowledge of covert participant observation that they fell into the bottom mark band.

Test Yourself

1. What is meant by covert participant observation?
2. Describe one piece of research that has used covert participation
3. What sort of data does participant observation produce?
4. Identify and explain two strengths of covert participant observation
5. Identify and explain two strengths of covert participant observation
6. Explain the difference between reliability and validity

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