

# Sociology Factsheet



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## Participant Observation 2 : Overt Participant Observation

This Factsheet will look at the research method of Participant Observation focussing particularly on the use of overt participant observation and the advantages and disadvantages of using this type of observation in sociological research. (See Factsheet 64 for details on covert participant observation.)

**Overt Participant Observation**, involves the researcher being open with the group they are going to study. Before joining a group the researcher is likely to inform the group's members (either personally or through the agency of a sponsor) about such things as the purpose of the research, its scope, how long the research will last etc.



### Examples of overt participant observation

1. **Eileen Barker**, "The Making of a Moonie", 1984 attended meetings, workshops and communal facilities of the Unification Church members to identify whether they were brainwashed into joining or whether there was choice involved.
2. **William F. Whyte's study Street Corner Society, 1943** studied the behaviour of a juvenile gang through overt participant observation where he was protected from potential antagonism by his friendship with 'Doc', his sponsor.

**Exam Hint:** In order to gain AO2 marks in the exam, you need to be able to use studies that have used this research method.

### Activity

How does overt observation differ from covert observation?  
Discuss this with other students and make a list of how they differ

### Advantages of overt participant observation

The advantages of overt participant observation fall into three main categories.

1. **If you're able to join a group openly, the problem of access can be fairly easily overcome.**

Overt participant observation may give access to groups who could not be studied covertly because the researcher does not have the same characteristics as the group. Overt participant observation makes it possible to gain access to groups where the researcher does not have the usual qualifications for entry (for example, being the right age, gender or ethnicity).



### For example

It would not be possible for a female researcher to covertly join a group - such as a juvenile gang or a Freemason's lodge - that only allow entrance to men.

Similarly, it would be difficult for a young researcher to covertly participate in the workings of the senior management in a transnational company, just as it would be impossible for a man to covertly research a group of nuns.

Many groups have complex organisational structures, whereby access is restricted to people of a certain level.

A school, for example, may have a head teacher whose office is "out-of-bounds" to staff and students. A researcher who joined the school covertly as a student would not have legitimate access to the head teacher's office, the staffroom etc.

Similarly, if a researcher covertly joins a large company as a shop-floor worker they would not have access to discussions carried-out in the company's Boardroom.

Additionally, some groups require their members to have actual qualifications (a degree, for example) and overt participant observation overcomes this potential obstacle to entrance.

**William Whyte** ("Street Corner Society") for example, was substantially older than the members of the juvenile gang whose behaviour he wanted to study. His solution to the "problem of access" came through doing overt participant observation; he gained the co-operation of gang's leader ("Doc"), who served to explain Whyte's presence in the group to other gang members.



2. **To a certain extent it overcomes a major problem associated with covert participant observation, namely that of how to record data while observing people's behaviour.**

The fact the researcher is involved with the group they are studying in an open way means it is relatively easy to generate and record data (especially in comparison with covert participant observation where the fact of being in the group secretly would make the group suspicious if you openly recorded conversations.)

With overt participant observation the researcher is, for example, able to record conversations, ask questions, take notes etc. with the knowledge and co-operation of the people involved.



**3. With overt participation, the researcher should find it easier to separate the roles of participant and observer. There is, consequently, a reduced chance of becoming too immersed in the behaviour of the group.**

A researcher who “goes native” effectively stops being a researcher. Whyte (“Street Corner Society”) found that he became so involved with the lives of gang members that he progressively came to see himself as “one of the gang” and not as a researcher who just happened to be researching gang behaviour.

**Disadvantages of overt participant observation**

This type of research does have a number of potential weaknesses / limitations.

These range from the relatively mundane (the amounts of time and expense involved), through possible problems with data interpretation to more serious questions about the researcher’s actual levels of involvement in the group and the extent to which this may be considered a naturalistic method of research.

**1. Time and Expense**

Overt participant observation is a very time-consuming exercise – for a researcher to become fully involved with a group may take months or in some cases years.



**2. Data Interpretation**

Overt observation makes demands on the researcher, not only in terms of observing and recording behaviour accurately, but also in terms of interpreting data. How does the researcher go about trying to make sense of the data they collect?

Any social group (especially a complex one) has many things happening at the same time. In such situations it’s difficult for the researcher to observe everyone and decisions have to be made about who to observe and when to observe them – significant evidence may be missed, leading to invalid interpretations of the group’s behaviour.

Also, behaviour that seems significant to the researcher (in their judgement) may not seem very significant to the people involved. Behaviour that appears mundane and uninteresting to the researcher may not be viewed in the same way by those involved.

**3. Reliability**

Participant observation studies are impossible to exactly repeat (“replicate”) - a fact which gives them limited reliability.

**4. Observer effects**

The problem here is that, even though people are being studied in their natural environment / habitat and the research is carried out with the co-operation of the people involved, there is no way of measuring how the presence of the observer influences the behaviour of group members.

The basic question, therefore, is that of the extent to which people who know they are being studied change the way they “normally” behave.

Is the observer seeing “normal behaviour” or does the observer’s presence produce an unknown level of change in people’s behaviour? **W.F. Whyte** (“Street Corner Society”) recognised – but never really solved - this problem.

**Street Corner Society**

During this observation, the leader of the juvenile gang being observed by Whyte (“Doc”), put his finger on this problem when he said to Whyte:

“You’ve slowed me up plenty. Now when I do something I have to think ‘what would Bill Whyte want to know about it?’ Before, I used to do things by instinct.”

**Valid**

A major problem is that involvement with the group being studied may be too superficial.

Given that one of the purposes of participant observation is to experience the world from the viewpoint of the people being studied, if the researcher does not become sufficiently involved with the group then this type of data might not be collected. The behaviour of the participants is likely to be affected by the presence of the researcher therefore, the data is unlikely to be valid.

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

**Activity**

Draw up a table similar to the one below.

Using this Factsheet and Factsheet 64 : Covert Participant Observation to summarise the similarities and differences between covert and overt participant observation.

	Overt	Covert
Access		
Observer Effect		
Personal experience		
‘Going native’		
Recording data		
Reliability		
Validity		
Ethics		



**Example Exam Question**

'Participant observation should always be conducted overtly.'

To what extent do sociological arguments and evidence support this view?

Many candidates will see this question as a straightforward account of the advantages and disadvantages of participant observation. Issues raised may include: time consuming, the stressful aspects of participant observation, the need for training and observational skills, issues linked to personal characteristics such as gender, ethnicity or age and the problems of recording data. While this material may form part of most answers, this question is really asking you to explore the nature of sociological research where observational methods are used and to consider some of the ethical, theoretical, ideological and practical factors involved with particular reference to the overt/covert issue.

You may also explore the range of influences that help to determine decisions within the research process, such as funding, time, access, personnel, sponsorship, the nature of the topic and so on. Reference should be made to studies where participant observation has been used as the research method.

There needs to be an argument about the use of overt v covert participant observation. You need to provide evidence that you understand this debate.

Your answer should include: an extensive, accurate and detailed account of ethical and/or practical factors, advantages and/or disadvantages associated with participant observation, linked appropriately to covert and/or overt with the development of an argument about which method might be more appropriate in different situations. Use of studies would be appropriate to develop this argument.

**Examiner Comments**

This question was well answered by many candidates. However, it was surprising how many candidates did not know the difference between overt and covert participant observation. Some candidates confused these terms with participant and non-participant.

The most common approach was to consider the sub-divisions of observation in turn and to explore a range of practical and theoretical issues, such as getting in and out, consent and deceit, asking questions, note-taking, maintaining cover, time, cost, danger and illegality. There was some good use of appropriate research. The better answers came from candidates who used their knowledge and understanding clearly to address the question rather than simply to describe a long list of research studies.

**Test Yourself**

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

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