

11

OBSERVATION

What is observational research? • Perception and observation
• Systematic observation and observation schedules • Creating an observation schedule • Retaining the naturalness of the setting
• Advantages of systematic observation • Disadvantages of systematic observation • Checklist for the use of observation schedules
• Participant observation • What to observe, what to record • Self, identity and participant observation • Advantages of participant observation • Disadvantages of participant observation • Checklist for participant observation

What is observational research?

Observation offers the social researcher a distinct way of collecting data. It does not rely on what people *say* they do, or what they *say* they think. It is more direct than that. Instead, it draws on the direct evidence of the eye to witness events at first hand. It is based on the premise that, for certain purposes, it is best to observe what actually happens.

There are essentially two kinds of observation research used in the social sciences. The first of these is *systematic observation*. Systematic observation has its origins in social psychology – in particular, the study of interaction in settings such as school classrooms. It is normally linked with the production of quantitative data and the use of statistical analysis. The second is *participant observation*. This is mainly associated with sociology and anthropology, and is used by researchers to infiltrate situations, sometimes as an undercover

operation, to understand the culture and processes of the groups being investigated. It is normally associated with qualitative data.

These two methods might seem poles apart in terms of their origins and their use in current social research, but they share some vital characteristics:

- *Direct observation.* The obvious connection is that they both rely on direct observation. In this respect they stand together, in contrast to methods such as questionnaires and interviews, which base their data on what informants tell the researcher, and in contrast to documents where the researcher tends to be one step removed from the action.
- *Fieldwork.* The second common factor is their dedication to collecting data in real-life situations – out there in the field. In their distinct ways, they both involve fieldwork. The dedication to fieldwork immediately identifies observation as an *empirical* method for data collection. As a method, it requires the researcher to go in search of information, at first hand, rather than relying on secondary sources.
- *Natural settings.* Fieldwork observation – distinct from laboratory observations – occurs in situations which would have occurred whether or not the research had taken place. The whole point is to observe things as they normally happen, rather than as they happen under artificially created conditions such as laboratory experiments. There is a major concern to avoid disrupting the *naturalness of the setting* when undertaking the research. In this approach to social research, it becomes very important to minimize the extent to which the presence of the researcher might alter the situation being researched.
- *The issue of perception.* Systematic observation and participant observation both recognize that the process of observing is far from straightforward. Both are acutely sensitive to the possibility that researchers' perceptions of situations might be influenced by personal factors and that the data collected could thus be unreliable. They tend to offer very different ways of overcoming this, but both see it as a problem that needs to be addressed.

Perception and observation

Two researchers looking at the same event ought to have recorded precisely the same things. Or should they? Using common sense, it might seem fairly obvious that, as long as both researchers were present and able to get a good vantage point to see all that was happening, the records of the events – the data – should be identical. Yet in practice this might not be the case. It is possible that the two researchers will produce different records of the thing they jointly witnessed.

Why should this be the case? Obviously, the competence of each individual researcher is a factor which has to be taken into consideration. The powers of

observation, the powers of recall and the level of commitment of individual researchers will vary, and this will have an effect on the observational data that are produced.

The variation in records also reflects psychological factors connected to memory and perception. Obviously, the research information on this area is vast but, as far as the use of observation as a research method is concerned, there are three things which are particularly important that emerge from the work of psychologists on these topics.

First, they point to the frailties of human memory and the way that we cannot possibly remember each and every detail of the events and situations we observe. Basically, we forget most of what we see. But what we forget and what we recall are not decided at random. There is a pattern to the way the mind manages to recall certain things and forget others. There is *selective recall*.

Second, they point to the way the mind filters the information it receives through the senses. It not only acts to reduce the amount of information, it also operates certain 'filters' which let some kinds of information through to be experienced as 'what happened', while simultaneously putting up barriers to many others. There is *selective perception*.

Third, they point to experiments which show how these filters not only let in some information while excluding the rest, but also boost our sensitivity to certain signals depending on our emotional and physical state, and our past experiences. What we experience can be influenced to some extent by whether we are, for instance, very hungry, angry, anxious, frustrated, prejudiced, etc. What we experience is shaped by our feelings at the moment and by the emotional baggage we carry around with us as a result of significant things that have happened to us during our lifetime. These things account for *accentuated perception*.

The selection and organization of stimuli, then, are far from random. In fact, there is a tendency to highlight some information and reject some other, depending on:

- *Familiarity*. We tend to see what we are *used* to seeing. If there is any ambiguity in what is being observed, we tend to interpret things according to frequent past experiences.
- *Past experiences*. Past experience 'teaches' us to filter out certain 'nasty' stimuli (avoidance learning) or exaggerate desirable things.
- *Current state*. Physical and emotional states can affect what is perceived by researchers. Physiological states such as hunger and thirst can influence the way we interpret what we 'see'. Emotions, anxieties and current priorities can likewise alter our perceptions.

Without delving too deeply into the psychology of perception, it is easy to appreciate that, as human beings, researchers do not simply observe and record the events they witness in some mechanical and straightforward fashion.

Evidence in relation to memory and perception indicates that the mind acts as an intermediary between 'the world out there' and the way it is experienced by the individual. There is almost inevitably *an element of interpretation*.

Systematic observation and observation schedules

The psychology of memory and perception explains why the facts recorded by one researcher are very likely to differ from those recorded by another, and why different observers can produce different impressions of the situation. However, all this is rather worrying when it comes to the use of observation as a method for collecting data. It suggests that the data are liable to be inconsistent between researchers – too dependent upon the individual and the personal circumstances of each researcher. It implies that different observers will produce different data.

It is precisely this problem which is addressed by systematic observation and its use of an *observation schedule*. The whole purpose of the schedule is to minimize, possibly eliminate, the variations that will arise from data based on individual perceptions of events and situations. Its aim is to provide a framework for observation which *all* observers will use, and which will enable them to do the following:

- be alert to the same activities and be looking out for the same things;
- record data systematically and thoroughly;
- produce data which are consistent between observers, with two or more researchers who witness the same event recording the same data.

To achieve these three aims, observation schedules contain a list of items that operate something like a checklist. The researcher who uses an observation schedule will monitor the items contained in the checklist and make a record of them as they occur. All observers will have their attention directed to the same things. The process of systematic observation then becomes a matter of measuring and recording how many times an event occurs, or how long some event continues. In this way, there will be a permanent record of the events which should be consistent between any researchers who use the schedule, because *what* is being observed is dictated by the items contained in the schedule. When researchers are properly trained and experienced, there should be what is called high 'inter-observer' reliability.

The value of findings from the use of an observation schedule will depend, however, on how appropriate the items contained in the schedule are for the situation. Precise measurements of something that is irrelevant will not advance the research at all. It is imperative, for this reason, that the items on the schedule are carefully selected. The findings will only be worth something

if the items can be shown to be appropriate for the issues being investigated, and for the method of observation as well.

Creating an observation schedule

Literature review

Initially, the possible features of the situation which might be observed using a schedule can be identified on the basis of a literature review. Such a literature review will present certain things as worthy of inclusion, and should allow the researcher to prioritize those aspects of the situation to be observed. It would be nice to have a huge number of items in the schedule, but this is not practical. Researchers are limited by the speed and accuracy with which it is possible to observe and record events they witness. So the items for inclusion need to be restricted to just the *most* significant and *most* relevant, because it is simply not feasible to include everything. Previous research and previous theories provide the key to deciding which features of the situation warrant the focus of attention.

Types of events and behaviour to be recorded

Observers can measure what happens in a variety of ways. The choice will depend on the events themselves and, of course, the purpose to which the results will be put. Observations can be based on:

- *Frequency of events.* A count of the frequency with which the categories/items on the observation schedule occur.
- *Events at a given point in time.* At given intervals (for instance, 25 seconds) the observer logs what is happening at that instant. This might involve logging numerous things which happen simultaneously at that point.
- *Duration of events.* When instances occur, they are timed, so that the researcher gets information on the total time for each category, and when the categories occurred during the overall time-block for the period of observation.
- *Sample of people.* Individuals can be observed for predetermined periods of time, after which the observer's attention is switched to another person in a rota designed to give representative data on all those involved in the situation.

Suitability for observation

When the items for inclusion in the schedule are being selected, there are seven conditions that need to be met. The things to be observed need to be:

- *Overt*. First and foremost, items should entail *overt behaviour* which is observable and measurable in a direct manner. Things like attitudes and thoughts need to be inferred by the researcher, and are not observable in a direct manner.
- *Obvious*. They should require a minimum of interpretation by the researcher. The researcher should have little need to decipher the action or fathom out whether an action fits one or another category.
- *Context independent*. Following from the point above, this means that the context of the situation should not have a significant impact on how the behaviour is to be interpreted.
- *Relevant*. They should be the most relevant indications of the thing to be investigated. It is important that the researcher chooses only valid indicators, things that are a good reflection of the things being studied.
- *Complete*. They should cover all possibilities. Care needs to be taken to ensure, as far as is possible, that the categories on the observation schedule cover the full range of possibilities and that there are not gaps which will become glaringly evident once the observation schedule is used in the field.
- *Precise*. There should be no ambiguity about the categories. They need to be defined precisely and there should be no overlap between them. There should be the most *relevant indicators* of the thing being investigated.
- *Easy to record*. They should occur with *sufficient regularity and sequence* for the observer to be able to log the occurrences accurately and fruitfully. If the category is something that is relatively rare, it will prove frustrating and wasteful of time to have a researcher – pen poised – waiting, waiting, waiting for something to happen. And if, like buses, the events then all come at once, the observer might well find it impossible to log all instances. There is a practical consideration here which affects the categories to be observed. (Choose one-at-a-time events, avoid simultaneously occurring events.)

Sampling and observation

When deciding what thing is to be observed, the researcher also needs to make a strategic decision concerning the kind of *sampling* to be used. Researchers using systematic observation generally organize their research around set time-blocks of observation in the field. For example, these might be one-hour chunks of time *in situ*. These time-blocks themselves need to be chosen so as to avoid any bias and to incorporate a representative sample of the thing in question. So, if the research were to be observations of interaction in school classrooms, the researcher would need to ensure that the research occurred across the full school week, the full school day and a cross-section of subjects. To confine observations to Friday afternoons, or to one subject such as history, would not provide an accurate picture across the board.

The same applies to the selection of *people* for inclusion in the study. To get a representative picture of the event or situation, the use of systematic observation can involve a deliberate selection of people to be observed, so that there is

a cross-section of the whole research population. In the case of observation in a school classroom, for example, the researcher could identify in advance a sample according to the sex and ability of students, thus ensuring that the observations that take place are based on a representative sample.

Good practice: sampling of events

Care should be taken to select the events or behaviour to be observed in accord with the principles of sampling (described in Chapter 1).

Example of an observation schedule

For the purposes of illustration, consider an observation schedule intended for use in art classes in a secondary school. The art classes are the 'situation' for which the observation schedule needs to be designed. Its 'purpose' is to measure the amount of lesson time wasted by students queuing to clean their paint brushes in the sink. Its aim might be to provide quantitative, objective data in support of the art teacher's bid for resources to have a second sink installed in the art classroom. The simple observation schedule to be used in this context could take the following format.

Location: School A

Date: 28 April

Time: 11 a.m. to 12 noon

<i>Identity of student</i>	<i>Student starts queuing</i>	<i>Student arrives at sink</i>	<i>Queuing time</i>
Student Ann	11.15	11.15	0
Student Tom	11.15	11.18	3
Student David	11.15	11.20	5
Student Diane	11.16	11.23	7
Student Tony	11.17	11.24	7
Student Eileen	11.19	11.26	7
Student			
Student			
Student			

In this example, a decision has been made to record the duration of the event: queuing time. It would have been possible to record the number of

occasions that students in the class queued, or to have noted at intervals of, say, 30 seconds over a one-hour period how many students were queuing at that moment. These would have provided slightly different kinds of results. If we were concerned with how queuing interrupted the concentration of students on a task, it would have been more appropriate to record the frequency. Had the aim been to look at bottlenecks in the queuing, time sampling would have allowed the ebb and flow of students to the sink to be shown quite clearly. When the aim is to support the claim that students' time is wasted in queues for the sink, it is appropriate to record the total time spent in the queue.

The item in this example is suitably straightforward to observe. We would presume that standing in line is an obvious and observable form of behaviour and that, despite some occasions when students might not be solely concerned with getting their paint brushes clean when they join the queue (they might be socializing or wasting time deliberately), standing in line offers a fairly valid indicator of the thing that is of interest to the researcher: time wasted queuing.

Recording contextual factors

Precisely because the use of an observation schedule has the tendency to decontextualize the things it records, more advanced practice in this area has made a point of insisting that researchers collect information about relevant background matters whenever they use a schedule (Galton et al. 1980). Such background information helps to explain the events observed, and should be logged with the schedule results to help the observer understand the data he or she has collected.

Good practice: using field notes to complement systematic observation

The quantitative data produced by systematic observation schedules should be complemented by field notes (qualitative data) in which the researcher (1) describes the context and (2) records his/her impressions about the circumstances surrounding the events or behaviour being observed.

Retaining the naturalness of the setting

With systematic observation, the issue of retaining the naturalness of the setting hinges on the prospect of the researcher fading into the background and becoming, to all intents and purposes, invisible. At first this might seem an

implausible thing. Armed with a clipboard and pen, and looking like a 'time and motion' researcher, it would seem unlikely that such systematic observation could avoid disrupting the events it seeks to measure. However, those who engage in this style of research report that it is indeed possible to 'merge into the wallpaper' and have no discernible impact. They stress that to minimize the likelihood of disruption researchers should pay attention to three things:

- *Positioning*. Unobtrusive positioning is vital. But the researcher still needs to be able to view the whole arena of action.
- *Avoiding interaction*. The advice here is to be 'socially invisible', not engaging with the participants in the setting if at all possible.
- *Time on site*. The experience of systematic observers assures them that the longer they are 'on site', the more their presence is taken for granted and the less they have any significant effect on proceedings.

Link up with **the Observer effect**, pp. 69, 142–3, 178–80, 326



Advantages of systematic observation

- *Direct data collection*. It directly records what people do, as distinct from what they say they do.
- *Systematic and rigorous*. The use of an observation schedule provides an answer to the problems associated with the selective perception of observers, and it appears to produce *objective* observations. The schedule effectively eliminates any bias from the current emotions or personal background of the observer.
- *Efficient*. It provides a means for collecting substantial amounts of data in a relatively *short timespan*.
- *Pre-coded data*. It produces quantitative data which are pre-coded and ready for analysis.
- *Reliability*. When properly established, it should achieve high levels of interobserver reliability in the sense that two or more observers using a schedule should record very similar data.

Disadvantages of systematic observation

- *Behaviour, not intentions*. Its focus on overt behaviour describes what happens, but not *why* it happens. It does not deal with the intentions that motivated the behaviour.

- *Oversimplifies*. It assumes that overt behaviours can be measured in terms of categories that are fairly straightforward and unproblematic. This is premised on the idea that the observer and the observed share an understanding of the overt behaviour, and that the behaviour has no double meaning, hidden meaning or confusion associated with it. As such, systematic observation has the in-built potential to oversimplify; to ignore or distort the subtleties of the situation.
- *Contextual information*. Observation schedules, by themselves, tend to miss contextual information which has a bearing on the behaviours recorded. It is not a holistic approach.
- *Naturalness of the setting*. Despite the confidence arising from experience, there remains a question mark about the observer's ability to fade into the background. Can a researcher with a clipboard and observation schedule really avoid disrupting the naturalness of the setting?

Checklist for the use of observation schedules

When using an observation schedule you should feel confident about answering 'yes' to the following questions:



- 1 Has the observation schedule been piloted?
- 2 Have efforts been made to minimize any disturbance to the naturalness of the setting caused by the presence of the observer?
- 3 Do the planned periods for observation provide a representative sample (time, place, context)?
- 4 Are the events/behaviour to be observed:
 - sufficiently clear-cut and unambiguous to allow reliable coding?
 - the most relevant indicators for the purposes of the research?
- 5 Is the schedule complete (incorporating all likely categories of events/behaviour)?
- 6 Do the events/behaviour occur regularly enough to provide sufficient data?
- 7 Does the schedule avoid multiple simultaneous occurrences of the event/behaviour which might prevent accurate coding?
- 8 Is the kind of sampling (event/point/time) the most appropriate?
- 9 Is there provision for the collection of contextual information to accompany the schedule data?

Participant observation

A classic definition of participant observation spells out the crucial characteristics of this approach, and the things which distinguish it from systematic observation:

By participant observation we mean the method in which the observer participates in the daily life of the people under study, either openly in the role of researcher or covertly in some disguised role, observing things that happen, listening to what is said, and questioning people, over some length of time.

(Becker and Geer 1957: 28)

As Becker and Geer indicate, the participant observer can operate in a completely covert fashion – like an undercover agent whose success depends on remaining undetected, whose purpose remains top secret. If no one knows about the research except the researcher, the logic is that no one will act in anything but a normal way. Preserving the *naturalness of the setting* is the key priority for participant observation. The principal concern is to minimize disruption so as to be able to see things as they normally occur – unaffected by any awareness that research is happening.

Another priority is to gain information about cultures or events which would remain hidden from view if the researcher were to adopt other methods. Such information could remain hidden for two reasons. Those involved in the culture or event could deliberately hide or disguise certain ‘truths’ on occasions when they are ‘under the microscope’. In this case, covert participant observation reveals such events by doing the research secretly. Nothing will get hidden. The ‘participant observer’ will be able to see everything – the real happenings, warts and all. Alternatively, aspects of the culture/events could remain hidden because researchers using other methods would remain unaware of them. In this case, participant observation discloses things through the researcher’s *experience* of participating in the culture or event. Only by experiencing things from the insider’s point of view does the researcher become aware of the crucial factors explaining the culture or event. With participant observation the aim is to get *insights* into cultures and events – insights only coming to one who experiences things as *an insider*.

The nature of participant observation also allows the researcher to place greater *emphasis on depth* rather than breadth of data. In principle, participant observation can produce data which are better able than is the case with other methods to reflect the detail, the subtleties, the complexity and the interconnectedness of the social world it investigates. In the spirit of anthropology, cultures and events are subject in the first instance to *detailed study*. Attention is given to intricate details of the social world being studied, and on the routine as well as the special and the extraordinary. Emphasis is placed on *holistic*

understanding, in which the individual things being studied are examined in terms of their relationships with other parts, and with the whole event or culture. And, in similar vein, things are examined in relation to their *context*. In those respects, participant observation scores highly in terms of the *validity* of the data.

Link up with **Ethnography, Chapter 4**



However, the participant observer role need not involve this total immersion. There are versions of participant observation in which the participation element is rather different. Participation, in this sense, means 'being there' and 'in the middle of the action'. One possibility here is that the researcher's role as an observer is still kept secret. Particularly when contemplating fieldwork in more salacious settings, this strategy can be very valuable (Humphreys 1970). O'Connell Davidson (1995), studying the working practices of a prostitute, acted occasionally as a receptionist for Madame Desirée, thus allowing her to be part of the normal scene but also allowing a judicious distance from the heart of the action.

Another possibility involves hanging out with a group rather than becoming a member of that group. And this can allow the researcher to be open about their purpose – to get consent for the research – in a way that is denied to the total version of participant observation. Of course, the downside of this is that the presence of the researcher can serve to disrupt the naturalness of the setting.

There are numerous variations which have been used that tinker with the extent of total participation and the extent of open observation, but the essential notion of participant observation revolves around the three possibilities:

- *Total participation*, where the researcher's role is kept secret. The researcher assumes the role of someone who normally participates in the setting. Consent cannot be gained for the research, which poses ethical problems.
- *Participation in the normal setting*, where the researcher's role may be known to certain 'gatekeepers', but may be hidden from most of those in the setting. The role adopted in this type of participant observation is chosen deliberately to permit observation without affecting the naturalness of the setting, but it also allows the researcher to keep a distance from the key group under study. This distance might be warranted on the grounds of propriety, or the researcher lacks the personal credentials to take on the role in question.
- *Participation as observer*, where the researcher's identity as a researcher is openly recognized – thus having the advantages of gaining informed consent from those involved – and takes the form of 'shadowing' a person or group through normal life, witnessing at first hand and in intimate detail the culture/events of interest.

What to observe, what to record

Starting fieldwork

The researcher should not enter the field with pre-established hypotheses to be tested. The researcher is there to learn about the situation. The longer the researcher is able to spend 'on site' the better, because the longer he or she is part of the action, the more can be learnt about the situation. Good participant observation demands that the researcher devotes considerable time to the fieldwork. This is not a hit-and-run research method. Time on site is needed to gain trust, to establish rapport and foster insights, insights that are the trademark of participant observation as a research method.

Then there is the question of what to observe during the time on site. The researcher should start out being fairly non-selective in terms of what he or she observes. Before anything else, the participant observer should aim to get an 'overall feel' for the situation, and to do this he or she should engage in what can be termed 'holistic observation'.

Of course, getting a general feel for the setting, while it is valuable as a background scene-setting device, is really a prelude to more *focused observations*. As things emerge which appear to have particular significance or interest, observation will shift from the broad canvas of activity in the setting towards specific areas. Things which emerge as important, strange or unusual invite closer scrutiny.

Following from focused observations, the researcher might be able to undertake special observations which concentrate on aspects of the setting in which there appear to be things which are unexpected or contradictory. Attention can be focused upon things that, according to the observer's common sense, ought not to happen.

Finally, observations can try to *identify issues and problems* which participants themselves regard as crucial. The point is to observe instances which indicate how members of the setting see things – their views, beliefs and experiences.

Making field notes

The fieldwork researcher needs to translate the observations into some permanent record at the very earliest opportunity. This might be 'field notes' in the form of written records or tape-recorded memos. Whatever the form, the researcher doing fieldwork needs to develop a strategy for writing up field notes as soon as possible after the observation.

The need to do so stems from two things. First, the human memory is not only selective, but also frail. It is so easy to forget things, particularly the minor incidents and passing thoughts, if field notes are delayed for a matter of days, let alone weeks. *Field notes are urgent business*. The researcher needs to build into the research some provision to make the field notes on a regular and

prompt basis. The second factor involved here is the general need to take field notes outside the arena of action. To take field notes while engaging in the action as a participant, to state the obvious, would be (1) to disrupt the naturalness of the setting, and (2) to disclose the researcher's role as observer. As a general rule, then, participant observers need to establish occasions during fieldwork, or very soon afterwards, when they can make field notes in private and unknown to those being observed. The simplest strategy is to write up the field notes as soon as you get home – assuming that home is separate from the field being studied.

Good practice: making field notes with participant observation

Detailed field notes should be made to accompany participant observation. These notes should be made as soon as possible following each episode of observation.

Ethics

Participant observation can pose particular ethical problems for the researcher. If 'total' participation is used, then those being studied will not be aware of the research or their role in it. They can hardly give 'informed consent'. The justification for such covert research cannot depend on consent, but draws instead on two other arguments. First, if it can be demonstrated that none of those who were studied suffered as a result of being observed, the researcher can argue that certain ethical standards were maintained. Second, and linked, if the researcher can show that the identities of those involved were never disclosed, again there is a reasonable case for saying that the participant observation was conducted in an ethical manner.

Whichever variant of participant observation is used, there is the possibility that confidential material might 'fall into the hands' of the researcher. Now, while this is true of most research methods, its prospects are exacerbated with the use of participant observation, owing to the closeness and intimacy of the researcher's role vis-à-vis those being researched. Confidential material might be disclosed inadvertently by someone who does not know the research interest of the participant. Or, possibly even more problematic, things might get revealed as a result of the trust and rapport developed between the researcher and those being observed. This could be true for any of the variants of participant observation. The ethical problem is whether to use such material and how to use it. And here the guidelines are quite clear: (1) any use of the material should ensure that no one suffers as a result; and (2) any use of the material should avoid disclosing the identities of those involved. Any departure from these guidelines would need very special consideration and justification.

Self, identity and participant observation

Equipment for research: the 'self'

One of the attractions of participant observation is that it hinges on the researcher's 'self', and does not call on much by the way of technical back-up in the form of gadgets or software. Nor does it tend to produce data that call for statistical analysis. *The key instrument of participant observation methods is the researcher as a person.*

This suggests that there is little in the way of 'entry costs' to act as a deterrent. Equipment costs are very low. There might appear to be no need for training (though this, of course, would be a fallacy). The researcher, it might seem, can jump right into the fieldwork and get on with it. However, as we see in the next sections, this dependence on the 'self' is not altogether a straightforward advantage.

Access to settings

Access is not necessarily a matter of getting approval from relevant authorities or getting a 'gatekeeper' to help open doors to the necessary contacts and settings. As well as these, when engaging in the total version of participant observation there is a special, peculiar issue affecting access. If the researcher is to adopt a role in the setting then he or she needs to have the *necessary credentials* – both personal and qualifications.

To operate 'under cover' in a setting it is obvious that the researcher should not stand out like a sore thumb. Depending on the situation, this can effectively exclude many researchers from many roles. The age factor will bar most (all?) researchers from using participant observation to investigate student cultures in schools. Observing the setting as a teacher is a more likely prospect. Sex will offer other barriers. Male researchers will be hard pushed to use total participant observation for the study of, for example, cocktail waitresses. Observing as a barman in the setting is a more likely prospect. Black researchers will find it exceptionally difficult to infiltrate the Ku Klux Klan. The biological factors place severe constraints on access to situations. Skills and qualifications provide another barrier. To participate in the sense of adopting a role, it is necessary to have the necessary skills and qualifications associated with that group. As Polsky (1967) points out, his study of pool hall hustling was only possible as a participant observer because – through a 'misspent youth' – he was already something of an accomplished pool player himself. The would-be researcher, however, might be reluctant or unable to achieve such a skill specifically for the purpose of a piece of research. Following the logic here, there are many, many roles which the researcher will be unable to adopt – from brain surgeon to tree surgeon – because of a lack of credentials.

Selecting a topic

In view of the constraints on access and the potential hazards of doing field-work as a full participant, there are two things which emerge that have a direct bearing on the selection of a topic.

- To a large extent, researchers who do participant observation have their topic selected for them on the basis of their pre-existing personal attributes. The 'choice' is rarely much of a free choice. The researcher's self – age, sex, ethnicity, qualifications, skills, social background and lifestyle – tends to direct the possibilities and provide *major constraints on the roles that can be adopted*.
- While it is arguably the most revealing and sensitive of research methods in the social sciences, it is also very demanding. *It is not a soft option*. The level of commitment needed for full participant observation can be far more than that demanded by other methods – commitment in terms of researcher's time and the degree to which the act of research invades the routine life of the researcher.

It is not surprising, then, that many of the fascinating studies emerge as 'one-offs' in which researchers have explored an area of social life for which they are uniquely qualified to participate through their own past experience. It is far more unusual to find examples where researchers have been deliberately employed to infiltrate a group (e.g. Festinger et al. 1956) or where researchers have consciously adopted a role which is alien to them and which involves danger and discomfort (e.g. Griffin 1962).

Another consequence of the restrictions to full participation is the decision of many social researchers to opt for the version of participant observation which is not 'total participation'. Participation in the setting and participation as observer offer approaches which side-step some of the dangers of total participation and offer a more palatable experience for the researcher on many occasions (e.g. Whyte [1943] 1981; Humphreys 1970; O'Connell Davidson 1995).

Good practice: choosing a topic to suit your 'self'

Researchers using participant observation generally choose a topic about which they have some insider knowledge and personal experience. The setting is normally one where the researcher can fit in easily and comfortably without disturbing the naturalness of the setting. In both sense, then, the choice of topic tends to suit the researcher's 'self'.

Going native

If the researcher has the necessary credentials and personal resources to gain access as a participant observer, they are then faced with the need to operate at two levels while in the setting. The success of participant observation relies on the researcher's ability, at one and the same time, to be a member of the group being studied *and* to retain a certain detachment which allows for the research observation aspect of the role. It is vital, in this respect, that the researcher does not lose sight of the original purpose for being there and does not get engulfed by the circumstances or swallowed up. The success of participant observation depends on being able to walk a tightrope between the involvement and passion associated with full participation and the cool detachment associated with research observation. If the researcher's self gets lost, this is rather like an anthropologist forgetting all about their research and settling down to live out their days as a member of the 'tribe' that they had originally set out to study: 'going native'.

Going native is an objectionable term, deservedly, for an objectionable phenomenon. It means over-identifying with the respondents, and losing the researcher's twin perspective of her own culture and, more importantly, of her 'research' and outlook.

(Delamont 1992: 34)

Dangers of fieldwork

Doing participant observation can be dangerous. First, there is *physical danger*. As Lee (1995) points out, being physically injured while doing fieldwork is fairly unlikely but, depending on the circumstances, cannot be ignored as a possibility. It is a potential built into some forms of fieldwork. Danger lurks for anthropologists who travel in remote regions with inhospitable climates and treacherous terrains. In the early years of the century, evidently, there were instances where anthropologists were actually killed by the people they were studying (Howell 1990). Danger lurks for political scientists who operate in unstable societies where the rule of law is tenuous and civilians can get caught up in factional disputes. Danger lurks for sociologists and ethnographers when they make contact with groups whose activities are on the margins of, or even outside, the law. As they tap into the underworlds of drugs, prostitution, football hooligans, bikers, religious sects and the like, they are taking a risk.

Imagine, for the sake of illustration, that a researcher sees the need to investigate the culture surrounding the use of hard drugs by young people. The use of a participant observation approach would seem well suited to such a study. After all, the 'reality' of how, when and why hard drugs are used is hardly likely to emerge by using questionnaires or experiments. Interviews might be useful, but there is a *prima facie* case for participant observation as the

method best suited to this particular issue. Provided that a researcher can overcome the first hurdle – to ‘look the part’ – the fieldwork then involves a range of dangers. There is actual physical danger. This is not just a reference to the prospect of getting mugged or assaulted, or of retribution if the cover is blown at some stage. There is also the danger posed by the lifestyle itself and the impact on health of a changed diet and changed accommodation. Changing lifestyle carries its own hazards. Of course, if the researcher were to become dependent on the use of hard drugs, the health consequences could be far more dramatic.

The fieldwork could involve a second danger: *legal prosecution*. Being ‘part of the scene’ when hard drugs are around immediately puts the researcher at risk of prosecution. There are no special immunities afforded to social researchers.

The researcher who chooses to engage in such fieldwork might also jeopardize his or her social well-being. The ‘other’ life he or she is called upon to live for the purposes of the research can have an adverse effect on domestic life, on relationships with others and on commitments to do with work and leisure which make up the ‘normal’ life of the researcher. *The researcher, in effect, needs to sustain two lifestyles*, and these may not be compatible. Being away from home, being out late and doing fieldwork at ‘unsocial’ hours can tax the patience of the nearest and dearest. (Let alone what the researcher does while in the field!)

Finally, there is the psychological danger resulting from the dual existence demanded of fieldwork such as this. The lifestyle, at its worst, can have something of a traumatic effect on the researcher, or can have a lasting or permanent effect on the researcher’s personality.

Good practice: avoid dangerous fieldwork

A risk assessment of the fieldwork setting should be conducted and potential dangers identified. Although experienced researchers might venture into dangerous contexts to conduct their participant observation this should not be done by project researchers.

Advantages of participant observation

- *Basic equipment*. Participant observation uses the researcher’s ‘self’ as the main instrument of research, and therefore requires little by way of technical/statistical support.
- *Non-interference*. It stands a better chance of retaining the naturalness of the setting than other social research methods.

- *Insights.* It provides a good platform for gaining rich insights into social processes and is suited to dealing with complex realities.
- *Ecological validity.* The data produced by participant observation have the potential to be particularly context sensitive and ecologically valid.
- *Holistic.* Participant observation studies offer holistic explanations incorporating the relationships between various factors.
- *Subjects' points of view.* As a method of social research, participant observation is good for getting at actors' meanings as they see them.

Disadvantages of participant observation

- *Access.* There are limited options open to the researcher about which roles to adopt or settings to participate in.
- *Commitment.* Participant observation can be a very demanding method in terms of personal commitment and personal resources.
- *Danger.* Participant observation can be potentially hazardous for the researcher; physically, legally, socially and psychologically risky.
- *Reliability.* Dependence on the 'self' of the researcher and on the use of field notes as data leads to a lack of verifiable data. Reliability is open to doubt. Because participant observation relies so crucially on the researcher's 'self' as the instrument of research, it becomes exceedingly difficult to repeat a study to check for reliability. The dependence on field notes for data, constructed (soon) after fieldwork and based on the researcher's recollections of events, does little to encourage those who would want to apply conventional criteria for reliability to this method.
- *Representativeness of the data.* There are problems of generalizing from the research. The focal role of the researcher's 'self' and the emphasis on detailed research of the particular setting open participant observation to the criticism that it is difficult to generalize from the findings. In one sense, this might hold water as a valid criticism. After all, the situations for research using participant observation are not selected on the grounds of being representative. As we have seen, they tend to be chosen on the basis of a mixture of availability and convenience. However, it might be argued that it is inappropriate to apply standard criteria of reliability and generalizability to this method.
- *Deception.* When researchers opt to conduct full participation, keeping their true identity and purpose secret from others in the setting, there are ethical problems arising from the absence of consent on the part of those being observed, and of deception by the researcher.

Checklist for participant observation

When undertaking participant observation you should feel confident about answering 'yes' to the following questions:



- 1 Has a risk-assessment been conducted which shows that there are no specific dangers linked with the fieldwork setting?
- 2 Is it clear which type of participant observation was used (total participation, participation in normal setting, participation as observer)?
- 3 Is there evidence that the participant observation did not disturb the naturalness of the setting?
- 4 Has consideration been given to the ethics of the fieldwork (secrecy, consent, confidentiality)?
- 5 Has the influence of the researcher's self-identity been examined in terms of:
 - the choice of fieldwork situation?
 - access to the setting?
 - the perception of events and cultures?
- 6 Was sufficient time spent in the field:
 - to allow trust and rapport to develop?
 - to allow detailed observations and an in-depth understanding of the situation (detail, context, interconnections)?
- 7 Does the participant observation allow insights to events and meanings that would not be possible using other methods?
- 8 Were field notes made at the time or soon after participating in the field?