

Participant observations can be either cover or overt. Covert is where the study is carried out 'under cover'. The researcher's real identity and purpose are kept concealed from the group being studied. The researcher takes a false identity and role, usually posing as a genuine member of the group. On the other hand, overt is where the researcher reveals his or her true identity and purpose to the group and asks permission to observe.

Limitations

1. It can be difficult to get time / privacy for recording. For example, with covert observations researchers can't take notes openly as this would blow their cover. This means they have to wait until they are alone and rely on their memory. This is a problem as they may forget details and are unlikely to remember direct quotations.
2. If the researcher becomes too involved they may lose objectivity and become biased. There is always the danger that we will "see" what we expect (or want) to see. This is a problem as they could selectively report information instead of noting everything they observe. Thus reducing the validity of their data.

Recording of Data

With all observation studies an important decision the researcher has to make is how to classify and record the data. Usually this will involve a method of sampling. The three main sampling methods are:

1. **Event sampling.** The observer decides in advance what types of behaviour (events) they are interested in and records all occurrences. All other types of behaviour are ignored.
2. **Time sampling.** The observer decides in advance that observation will take place only during specified time periods (e.g. 10 minutes every hour, 1 hour per day) and records the occurrence of the specified behaviour during that period only.
3. **Instantaneous (target time) sampling.** The observer decides in advance the pre-selected moments when observation will take place and records what is happening at that instant. Everything happening before or after is ignored.