

Participant observation

Participant observation refers to a form of sociological research methodology in which the researcher takes on a role in the social situation under observation. The social researcher immerses herself in the social setting under study, getting to know key actors in that location in a role which is either *covert* or *overt*, although in practice, the researcher will often move between these two roles. The aim is to experience events in the manner in which the subjects 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.

There are two main types of participant observation; *covert* and *overt*:-

Covert observation involves:

- the social researcher participating fully without informing members of the social group of the reasons for her presence, thus the research is carried out secretly or covertly.
- contact with a '*gatekeeper*', a member of the group under study who will introduce the researcher into the group.

Problems of covert observation include:

- the researcher having to become involved in criminal or dangerous activities, particularly where the research is studying a 'deviant' social group.
- problems of negotiating and having to act out forms of behaviour which the researcher may personally find unethical or distasteful.
- the researcher having to employ a level of deceit, since the researcher is essentially lies about the nature of her presence within the group.
- close friendships are often resulting from connections with members of the group under study and the covert nature of the research can put a tremendous strain on the researcher, both in and out of the fieldwork setting.
- the problem of 'going native', which refers to the fact that a researcher will cease to be a researcher and will become a full-time group participant.

Advantages of this type of covert participant role are:

- the researcher may gain access to social groups who would otherwise not consent to being studied.
- The avoidance of problems of *observer effect*, the conception that individuals' behaviour may change if they know they are being studied. However, there are problems of recording data.

Overt observation involves:

- the researcher being open about the reason for her presence in the field of study since the researcher is given permission by the group to conduct her research.
- the use of a 'sponsor', who is an individual likely to occupy a high status within the group, therefore lessening any potential hostility towards the researcher.

Problems with overt observation include:

- *Observer effect*, where the behaviour of those under study may alter due to the presence of the researcher.

Advantages of the use of overt observation include: