

12 Participant Observation

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Objectives

- identify types of participant observation (i.e., active vs. passive and overt vs. covert)
- discuss the utility of participant observation for hypothesis building and hypothesis testing
- provide practical information about conducting participant observation (e.g., case selection, access, building rapport, and recording observations)
- describe the process of analyzing and presenting information collected through participant observation

Participant observation is commonly associated with ethnographic research in anthropology, but is increasingly used today in other fields, including education, criminology, sociology, and even business and marketing.¹ *Participant observation* is a form of qualitative data collection that involves the immersion of researchers into the environment of their subjects for an extended period of time. The reasoning behind participant observation is, as Harper Lee wrote in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, that ‘[y]ou cannot really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.’² Through immersion, researchers are able to observe the daily lives of people – their exchanges with each other, their formal and informal conversations, activities, habits, and so forth. Immersion provides researchers with an opportunity to collect candid and intimate information about people. This information, though, is filtered through the perspective of the researchers who, in using this method, are at risk of losing their objectivity and of altering the behavior of the groups that they study through their presence.

Features of Participant Observation

While participant observation by definition involves the immersion of a researcher into the environment of their subjects, there are two dimensions that distinguish different forms of participant observation from each other. They are the extent to which the researchers interact with their subjects (i.e., active versus passive observation), and whether the observation is concealed or not (i.e., overt versus covert observation). [Table 12.1](#) summarizes the advantages and disadvantages of these different forms of participant observation.

	Active	Covert
Advantages	better access to certain activities of subjects experience activities as subjects would experience them	subjects do not alter behavior in response to researcher's presence (no guinea pig effect)
Disadvantages	researcher's presence may alter behavior of subjects practices that researcher participates in may be dangerous or illegal greater risk of losing objectivity	potentially violates privacy of subjects and denies subjects right to consent to be studied

Table 12.1 (Dis)advantage of types of participant observation

Active versus Passive Observation

In the passive form of participant observation, researchers observe and record the behaviors of their subjects in their own environment without conversing or interacting with their subjects in any way. Many studies using this form of participant observation are studies in which researchers observe the behavior and communications of people in public places, such as restaurants, cafés, transportation hubs, and even the internet. Examples of the latter include studies of support groups for people with medical or psychological disorders (Sharf 1997; Brotsky and Giles 2007) and chat rooms of extremist or hate groups (Awan 2017; Bloom et al. 2017).

In the active form of participant observation, in contrast, researchers converse with their subjects and take part in the daily life of the groups that they study, including their activities, customs, rituals, routines, and so forth. The extent to which researchers engage with these groups varies. Some researchers limit their interactions to interviews while others engage in every aspect of their subjects' lives. Examples of this form of participant observation include studies where researchers lived for long periods of time among different ethnic, cultural, or religious communities (Mead 1928; Geertz 1973; Goffman 2014), resided in prisons or in gang-run communities (Wacquant 2002), and checked into medical and/or psychiatric facilities as patients (Rosenhan 1973).

An important advantage of the passive form of participant observation is that researchers are unlikely to significantly change the behavior of the groups that they study by only observing, as opposed to interacting with, groups. This provides researchers with a more natural or accurate representation of the groups that they analyze.

At the same time, though, researchers may not be able to observe as many activities of the group as they would be able to through a more active form of participant observation because some activities may only be observable to someone who participates in them.

Moreover, unless researchers participate in the daily lives of their subjects, they cannot experience events in the same way as members of the group. For example, unless researchers wear a hijab or other religious garments, they cannot experience what it feels like for passersby on the street to look at them as if they were an outcast or threat to their community.

Although researchers may have better access to a group, and may be able to experience things as a member of a group would in the active form of participant observation, researchers are at a greater risk in this form of participant observation of losing their objectivity through such close interactions with members of the group. If researchers experience contentious interactions with members of the group, they may overlook sympathetic characteristics about the group's behaviors. Conversely, if researchers experience positive interactions, they may perceive the group's behaviors in an overly compassionate light.

Researchers, for example, after spending months in refugee camps, may come to deeply empathize with the plight of the refugees, and overlook, as a result, information about the negative behaviors of refugees, including crimes they commit against other refugees, which might undermine the willingness of governments to accept further refugees into their countries. If researchers, however, are victims of the crimes themselves, they may emphasize or exaggerate in their research the potential threat refugees pose to local communities.

Finally, in the active form of participant observation, researchers can be asked to participate in dangerous or illegal acts perpetrated by the groups they observe. These acts may entail minor

infractions, such as unpermitted protests, or major violations, such as illegal drug deals and theft. In these situations, researchers face a moral dilemma as to whether or not to participate in the activity, to violate the confidence of the group to stop the wrongful act, and to report the perpetrators to authorities. Researchers may also be asked to participate in acts that are not dangerous or illegal but that are odds with their views, which can be equally disconcerting for researchers in many cases.

Overt versus Covert Observation

Participant observation also varies in terms of the extent to which the observation is covert or overt. In the case of covert participant observation, researchers do not make their presence known to their subjects and, if they do, they do not identify themselves as researchers, while in the case of overt participant observation they do both. But, even when the research is overt, researchers do not generally inform people that they encounter in the course of their research about the specific purpose of their research, or inform everyone that they meet that they are researchers since this could needlessly disrupt the conversations and events being observed.

Examples of covert participant observation include studies in which researchers observe and even interact with people in public places, such as restaurants, transportation hubs, stores, and online chat rooms, but do not introduce themselves as researchers or inform people that they are being studied (Sharf 1997; Brotsky and Giles 2007; Awan 2017; Bloom et al. 2017). They also include studies in which researchers have gone undercover as patients in psychiatric hospitals (Rosenhan 1973; Smithers 1977), alcoholics at Alcoholic Anonymous meetings (Lofland and Lejeune 1960; Rudy 1986), and adherents of religious sects with unconventional practices (Homan 1978).

The primary benefit of covert observation is that since participants do not know that they are being observed, they cannot change their behavior (the guinea pig effect) in response to the presence of the researcher. If participants knew they were being studied, they might try to hide particular behaviors from the researcher or frame events to put themselves in the most positive light possible. They might even fabricate or contrive events for the benefit of the researcher. A police department, for example, that knows it is being observed by a researcher in light of recent cases of police brutality, might inundate this researcher with stories of blatantly falsified brutality charges, or hold anti-bias training programs that it otherwise would not.

Another benefit of covert participant observation is that researchers may be able to observe a group through covert observation that they otherwise would not be given permission to observe. Such was the case in a study conducted by Leon Festinger and colleagues (1956) about an apocalyptic cult. Festinger and his colleagues did not seek permission of the cult leaders to observe the group, expecting to be denied permission if they did. They gained access to the cult by pretending instead to believe in the cult's predictions. In the study, Festinger and colleagues sought to observe how cult members reacted when the world did not end on the day the cult expected.

When it did not, cult members accepted their leader's explanation that God spared the world because they had spread light in the world by sitting outside all night long in anticipation of the world's end. The cult members' behavior was consistent with Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance because they rationalized the situation in a way that maintained their self-esteem. Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance states that when people hold contradictory beliefs, ideas, and values, they will either change their behavior or cognitions to resolve the contradiction or ignore or deny any information that conflicts with their existing beliefs.

This justification for covert observation is controversial and would not be permissible under many human subject standards today. Critics argue that researchers do not have the right to observe a group that does not give its consent to being observed. Others argue that at least in certain circumstances, as in the case of research on extremist groups that pose a threat to society (Awan 2017; Bloom et al. 2017), the benefit of the research outweighs the privacy concerns of the group. Still others argue that researchers should not have to ask the permission of a group to observe it if anyone who was not a researcher or a member of the group could observe the group's behaviors.

Types of Participant Observation

The combination of these two dimensions – active versus passive observation and overt versus covert observation – results in four different types of participant observation with their own unique advantages and disadvantages, as depicted in [Figure 12.1](#).

Figure 12.1 Types of participant observation

	Overt	Covert
Passive	overt and passive	covert and passive
Active	overt and active	covert and active

Covert and Active Participant Observation

There are several advantages to covert and active participant observation. In this type of participant observation, researchers may have access to a group that they may not otherwise have an opportunity to observe, and they may experience the practices of the group as members of the group would experience them. Researchers, though, may alter the behavior of the group through their presence. However, in this form of participant observation, groups would not knowingly change their behavior in response to the presence of the researcher because in this form of participant observation, groups would not be aware of being observed (the guinea pig effect).

Festinger et al.'s (1956) study of the Seekers' cult is an example of covert and active participant observation. The observation was covert since the researchers gained access to the group by pretending to be followers of the cult and professing stories about dreams and prophecies consistent with the group's beliefs. It was active since the researchers not only observed the cult's activities, but

also led group meetings and participated in mediums. While the researchers tried to limit their participation so as not to change the group's behavior, the researchers did admittedly reinforce the apocalyptic cult's beliefs by participating in its activities.

Covert and Passive Participant Observation

Unlike in the case of overt and passive participant observation, researchers are not likely to alter the behaviors of their subjects in the case of covert and passive participant observation, because researchers do not actively engage with their subjects in this form of participant observation, and because their subjects are also unaware that they are being observed. However, since the observation is passive in this form of participant observation, researchers do not have the opportunity to experience the lives of their subjects for themselves. Examples of covert and passive participant observation include studies in which researchers observe people in public places without making their identity known and without interacting with their subjects in any way (Sharf 1997; Brotsky and Giles 2007; Awan 2017; Bloom et al. 2017).

Overt and Active Participant Observation

If participant observation is both overt and active, people may participate in the activities of their subjects and experience them as their subjects would, but they run the risk of both changing the behavior of their subjects through their interactions with them, and their subjects changing their behavior on their own knowing that they are being studied. Examples of this form of participant observation include studies of different ethnic, cultural, or religious communities (Mead 1928; Geertz 1973; Goffman 2014).

Overt and Passive Participant Observation

As in the case of covert and passive participant observation, researchers do not run the risk of their presence altering the behavior of the groups that they study through their interactions with them in the case of overt and passive participant observation. However, the guinea pig effect is an issue for this form of participant observation unlike in the case of covert and passive participant observation, because participants are aware of being studied in this form of participant observation. Researchers are also unable to experience the world as their subjects would experience it in this form of participant observation.

An example of overt and passive participant observation is Zachariah Mampilly's (2011) study of rebel governance structures. In it, he examines why certain rebel groups and not others provide public goods (e.g., security, justice, education, and health care) to communities under their control. His research was overt because Mampilly identified himself as a researcher to the local communities he observed. It was passive because Mampilly did not personally receive any of the public goods that the rebel groups distributed or engage with the communities he observed in other ways. On the basis of his research, Mampilly concluded that only rebel groups with unified command structures provide public goods to communities and only when they can co-opt international aid agencies and existing government institutions for this purpose.

The Utility of Participant Observation

While participant observation is excellent for hypothesis building, it is not very useful for hypothesis testing. The single-case design, the subjectivity of the data derived from participant observation, and lack of clear guidelines regarding the conditions under which data collected from participant observation can confirm or disconfirm an argument, make this method of limited utility for hypothesis testing. The fact that participant observation can alter the behavior of those observed if it is overt and active is a problem for both building and testing hypotheses.

[Table 12.2](#) summarizes the advantages and disadvantages of participant observation for both hypothesis building and hypothesis testing.

	Hypothesis building	Hypothesis testing
Pros	direct, close, and prolonged observation of subjects	
Cons	potential observer bias (except covert observation)	single case study
		generalizability uncertain
	potential guinea pig effect (except covert observation)	conclusions open to interpretation
		no replicability
		potential observer bias (except covert observation)
		potential guinea pig effect (except covert observation)

Table 12.2 Table 12.2 Utility of participant observation

Hypothesis Building

Participant observation is very useful for building hypotheses through inductive reasoning because it gives researchers an opportunity to obtain an in-depth and candid view of their subjects in their own environment. The extent to which it does both of these things depends on the form of participant observation and the duration of the observation. The view is less candid if the observation is overt, and less in-depth if the observation is passive and short-lived.

However, even when the observation is overt, researchers are likely to get a more candid view of the groups that they observe than with other methods, such as interviews, focus groups, and surveys, because the observation takes place in the subjects' own environment and because these other methods are subject to the same biases. In their own environment, people are not continually reminded that they are part of a research study and are likely to be less guarded in their conversations with researchers as a result. By contrast, the formal environment of an interview or focus group makes people very much aware that they are being studied, and the likelihood that their responses will be guarded even higher as a result.

By observing people in their own environments, researchers are also able to observe people's spontaneous reactions to unexpected events, such as the death of a close relative or a natural disaster. Through participant observation, researchers may also be able to detect patterns in people's behaviors that people themselves are not consciously aware of and, therefore, cannot share with researchers in an interview, focus group, or survey.

Take for example a consumer preferences study commissioned by the Swedish alcohol brand, Absolut Vodka. In order to learn why people buy liquors for at-home parties, Absolut Vodka hired a firm,

which observed guests at these parties across the US.³ At these parties, researchers noticed that guests often told humorous anecdotes related to their experiences with a particular liquor, like going to a bar on the wrong night for a birthday party. From this observation, the researchers deduced that individuals purchased liquors for at-home parties due to a personal attachment with the liquor. On the basis of this, the researchers recommended that Absolut Vodka adopt a marketing strategy that emphasized conversation, storytelling, and humor rather than the quality of the liquor, in order to capture the at-home market.

Although most participant observation today still involves the immersion of a researcher into the real-world environment of their subjects, new technologies have recently been developed that allow for virtual participant observation. In virtual participant observation, subjects permit researchers to observe their environments via so-called video surveys. So far, this technology is used primarily by businesses that want to observe how customers use their products. In these video surveys, subjects use their mobile phones to not only show researchers their surroundings, but also to answer questions, and/or undertake tasks asked of them. The technology does not provide researchers with the same experience as in-person participant observation since the observation is limited in time and content, but it does enable researchers to have a broader, more elaborate understanding of certain issues.

Hypothesis Testing

Participant observation is not very useful for testing hypotheses, in contrast, and not commonly used for this purpose either. In addition to the fact that the act of observation itself can alter the behavior of subjects if it is overt and active (also a problem for hypothesis building), participant observation is not useful for hypothesis testing because studies using it are generally based on a single case, and the data derived from these cases are subjective and non-transparent.

Studies using participant observation are generally based on a single case because of the prolonged and involved nature of research using this method. Single case studies, as discussed in [Chapter 9](#), cannot confirm or disconfirm probabilistic theories, which are the vast majority of theories in the social sciences. Single case studies cannot confirm probabilistic theories because the one case analyzed is not necessarily representative of other cases. They cannot disconfirm them either because probabilistic theories do not claim that a given factor always results in a certain outcome.

Single case studies cannot confirm deterministic theories either because even if the outcomes resulted in the presence of necessary conditions or sufficient conditions (or necessary and sufficient conditions), there may be other cases in which the result occurred in the absence of these conditions. Single case studies can disconfirm deterministic theories, but only when outcomes consistent with a theory resulted in the absence of the necessary conditions, or did not result in the presence of sufficient ones.

Data collected through participant observation is also not useful for theory testing because it is subjective and non-transparent and, therefore, not replicable as well. The data are subjective in so much as researchers can interpret the same observations collected through participant observation very differently based on their own backgrounds and experiences. As in the case of interview and focus group data, which are also subjective, there are no clear-cut guidelines against which to evaluate whether the conclusions that researchers draw based on data collected through participant observation confirm or disconfirm their hypotheses.

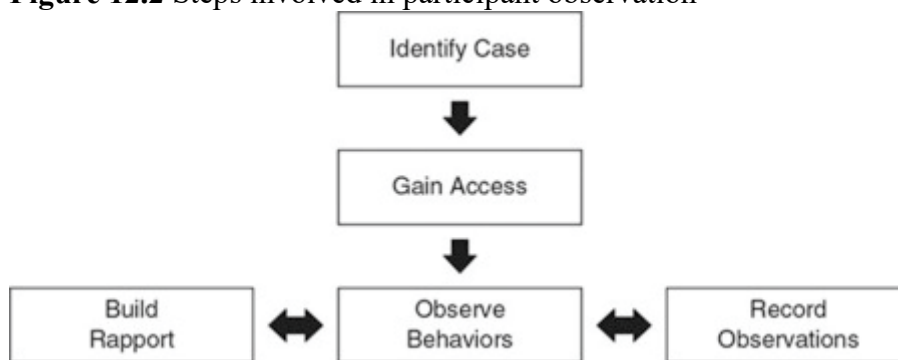
Data collected through participant observation are often non-transparent as well. Typically, researchers cannot share the raw data that they collect through participant observation in order to protect the confidentiality of their subjects. Even if researchers redacted the names of their subjects from their field notes, due to the specificity and uniqueness of the information that researchers typically gather through participant observation, others may be able to deduce the identities of people described in these notes.

At times, researchers using participant observation have gone to great lengths to protect the confidentiality of their subjects, as in the infamous case of Mario Brajuha (Brajuha and Hallowell 1986). Brajuha refused to comply with a subpoena for his field notes when the New York City restaurant that he was observing as a waiter burned down in an arson incident. Brajuha faced jail time for refusing to hand over his notes and death threats against him and his family if he did. The death threats stopped when the two arson suspects died for reasons unrelated to the case. In the end, a judge rejected the subpoena, deciding that academics' notes, like those of journalists, are entitled to protection against unwarranted scrutiny in legal proceedings.

Conducting Participant Observation

Participant observation requires first selecting the case to observe and second, gaining access to this group. Once researchers have access to this group, they can then set about establishing a rapport with members of the group while observing, interacting with, and recording the behaviors of members of the group, and then, ultimately, interpreting the information they collect. With the exception of the first two steps, these steps are not sequential but continuous throughout the entire observation period, as reflected in the illustration in [Figure 12.2](#).

Figure 12.2 Steps involved in participant observation



Selecting the Case

The first step in conducting an analysis using participation observation is to identify the case for analysis. If the researcher is using the case to build an argument, a researcher may select a case that they believe is typical of other cases. Many times researchers are unable to determine if a case is typical or not because they lack information about the whole universe of cases. In this situation, the researcher may instead choose a case that is prominent or that is convenient for the researcher to explore due to a personal connection to the group or another reason. The hypotheses researchers build may not be generalizable in this case, however.

If researchers are using a case to disconfirm a deterministic hypothesis (the ideal situation for a single-case study design), researchers ought to choose a case where they suspect that the necessary

condition (or the necessary and sufficient condition) is absent and where the hypothesized outcome occurred anyway, or where the sufficient condition (or the necessary and sufficient condition) is present and the hypothesized outcome did not result. If researchers are using participant observation to test a probabilistic theory (or to confirm a deterministic theory), they should try to select a representative case if at all possible.

Gaining Access

The next step involves acquiring permission to observe the group. If the research is covert, this step is not necessary. The person or persons responsible for granting researchers access to a group depends on the subject of the study. These individuals may be political, community, or religious leaders, military or police officials, union heads, bureaucrats, managers of online chat rooms, and so forth.

In order for researchers to convince this person to grant them permission to observe the group, researchers ought to furnish this person with a letter of introduction explaining the general purpose of their research and how long they would like to observe the group, and also proof of their affiliation and funding sources. In the letter of introduction, researchers should also explain in detail the procedures they have put in place to maintain the confidentiality and/or anonymity of the group they want to study, and the way that they intend to use the information they collect.

Once researchers have permission to study a group, they may still need the help of a gatekeeper to introduce them to individuals within the group. The gatekeeper should be someone who has many associates within the group and who will not alienate researchers from any subset of members within the group. The gatekeeper should not be someone who will cause members of the group to suspect that researchers have a certain agenda in their work due to their association with this person.

If, for example, the researcher is observing prison life, the gatekeeper should not be a member of a gang, who will alienate the gatekeeper from rival gang members. Likewise, if a researcher is analyzing the organizational cultures of firms that permit sexual harassment, the gatekeeper should not be a person within the organization who has been vocal about gender-related issues.

Building Rapport

Gatekeepers only introduce researchers to members of the group. In order for researchers to convince individuals within the group to share information with them, researchers need to develop a rapport with them. Rapport is built over time. To develop a rapport with members of the group, researchers need to listen attentively to what individuals share with them without passing judgment on it, show respect for the group's language, customs and traditions, and demonstrate their ability to maintain the confidentiality of the information shared with them. The researcher must be mindful that their efforts do not come across to members of the group as fake or manipulative. Spending a significant amount of time with a group can also help to build rapport by demonstrating the genuineness of the researcher's interest in the group.

Cartoon 12.1



"I seem to be having a little difficulty getting past your gatekeepers..."

Observe Behaviors

When in the field, researchers will invariably have to make choices about whom to observe and what to observe about whom since they cannot observe every member of a group or every event. These choices can affect the conclusions that researchers draw from their research. Another researcher observing the same group, but a different set of people and events, might reach different conclusions. In order to produce the most complete representation of a group possible, researchers ought to observe as many different types of people within the group as possible.

Ideally, to do this, a researcher would use a nested sampling frame to select individuals to observe, choosing people randomly among categories of individuals and settings. However, this is not realistic. Many of the interactions researchers have with people in the field occur by chance, or through snowball sampling – that is, with individuals, including the gatekeeper, introducing the researcher to one person, who introduces the researcher to another person, and so on and so forth.

In participant observation, not just whom the researcher observes is important, but what the researcher observes about whom. Researchers should take notes not only of what is said between individuals, but what is not said between them, and what events do not occur. They should also pay heed to how things are said – the tone of voice used, as well as the emotions, facial expressions and body language conveyed.

Body language can provide researchers with important insights into people's unconscious thoughts. In order to interpret it properly, though, researchers must be very familiar with the culture of the group that they are studying since the meaning behind certain mannerisms can differ significantly across groups. Bulgarians, for example, nod their head up and down to indicate 'no', while in the rest of Europe and North America, people nod their head up and down to indicate 'yes'.

Researchers should also take note of the physical appearance of individuals, including their dress, and the physical environment in which activities occur. The latter may include the number of people present at an event, the location and time that an event or conversation occurs, and the condition of the location. If appropriate, the researcher may take photographs or videos of the location.

Recording Observations

Participant observation requires that researchers take copious notes. Taking notes openly and continuously in certain circumstances can be obtrusive and can trigger the guinea pig effect by reminding people that they are being studied. Openly recording a conversation or event can be equally problematic. In these circumstances, the best researchers can do is take brief notes in the moment, if possible, and write down in detail what they can recall in their field notes afterwards.

Typically, at first, researchers write down notes on everything they observe. Eventually, however, researchers tend to take notes more selectively as it becomes apparent to them what is important to record. It is important that in doing so, researchers do not ignore or neglect to record information that does not fit with any patterns that they think are already emerging from the data.

In addition to taking notes about what they observe, researchers should also take notes about what they think of what they observe. That is, researchers should record their impressions, opinions, and thoughts about the conversations and events that they witness, clearly distinguishing their empirical observations from their interpretation of them. This commentary will prove helpful in constructing the final analysis.

Prior to analyzing the data, some researchers ask their subjects whether or not their field notes accurately describe their beliefs and behaviors. This technique, referred to as 'respondent validity,' is controversial, and for good reason, because it allows respondents to change how events or conversations really occurred in order to fit with how they would like them to be seen in the world.

Analyzing Participant Observation Data

Ideally, researchers will not leave the field until they have reached a saturation point and are learning little, if anything, new from their observations. Once they do, they can begin in full their analysis of the data. The process of analyzing data from participant observation is very similar to the process of analyzing data collected from interviews and focus groups. The first step involves developing analytic categories with which to organize the researchers' observations. Since the goal of participant observation is usually to generate hypotheses, not to test hypotheses, these categories are typically developed inductively based on the researchers' field notes. These categories should include not only conversational data, as in the case of interviews and focus groups, but data on events as well. What these analytic categories are depends on the data. They may include types of events, interactions, reactions, attitudes, and so forth.

After researchers have defined these categories, and coded their data accordingly, researchers can begin to identify more systematically patterns or recurrent themes in the data. The final step is to interpret and explain these patterns. In the write up of the analysis, it is important that researchers, if they promised to keep the information that they collected confidential and/or anonymous, only describe people and places in general terms and use pseudonyms where necessary. In this process, researchers must be careful not to provide false or misleading information, either intentionally or unintentionally, as sociologist Alice Goffman learned the hard way in her first book, *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*. In this book, Goffman describes how policing tactics in one low-income neighborhood in Philadelphia, known as ‘6th Street’, created a climate of fear, distrust, and paranoia among African-American men in the neighborhood.

Unfortunately, inconsistencies in her account of 6th Street overshadowed the story of this neighborhood. Goffman claims that the inconsistencies arose from her efforts to protect the identities of her sources, while Goffman’s critics claim that they are evidence that Goffman fabricated aspects of her account. In one such inconsistency a person named Chuck drove a family member to a court hearing despite having died two years earlier. Since Goffman promised members of 6th Street anonymity and destroyed her field notes to do so, doubts will always remain regarding the integrity of this work.

Key Points

- Participant observation lends itself well to hypothesis building because it allows researchers to observe their subjects in their own environment for a prolonged period of time.
- Participant observation is not suitable for hypothesis testing due to its single-case study design; the subjectivity of the interpretation of data collected through it; the lack of replicability; and the potential for researchers to change their subjects’ behavior through it. The latter is also problematic for hypothesis building.
- The active versus passive and covert versus overt forms of participant observation have tradeoffs related to the depth and accuracy of the information acquired, and the subjects’ right to privacy.

Further Reading

The first and third readings provide introductions to the method of participation observation and discuss practical issues and ethical concerns involved in it. The second and fourth readings discuss issues specific to marketing research and women.

Angrosino, Michael. 2008. *Doing Ethnographic and Observational Research*. London: Sage Publications.

Belk, Russell, Eileen Fischer, and Robert V. Kozinets. 2013. *Qualitative Consumer and Marketing Research*. London: Sage Publications.

Jorgensen, Danny L. 1989. *Participant Observation: A Methodology of Human Studies*. London: Sage Publications.

Mazzei, Julie and Erin E. O’Brien. 2009. ‘You Got It, So When Do You Flaunt It? Building Rapport, Intersectionality, and the Strategic Deployment of Gender in the Field.’ *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 38(3): 358–383.

Exercise 12.1



For one of the scenarios depicted below, design a study using participant observation. First, decide what it is you want to study, and second, what type of participant observation you will use (i.e., overt or covert and active or passive). Justify your decision based on what it is you want to learn from your study and what ethical concerns you have about any potential harm to your subjects and their right to privacy.

- An extremist organization's (encrypted) Telegram group.
- Customers in a trendy London coffee shop.
- LinkedIn accounts accessible to you because the account owners are members of the same LinkedIn Group that you joined using a fake account.
- Psychological support groups in which the rules for membership do not explicitly prohibit research but indicate that the forum is for mutual support and information sharing only.
- Facebook pages accessible to you as a friend of a friend.

Exercise 12.2



Compose your own field notes. Visit a public place for 15 minutes where you can both see and hear the activity that is taking place. Record the conversations you hear using your phone or an audio recorder, but do not write down anything while in the field. Then, leave the location, and immediately write down (without referring to your audio recording) what you observed about the environment and the conversations you heard, as well as your impressions of the conversations. Then, listen to the recording. How much of the conversations did you recall in your notes? Now, return to the location, how well did your notes depict the physical environment of the place you visited? Identify the reasons why you think you did not document certain things in your field notes about the environment and the conversations you heard, and why you did others. Consider how you might improve your observation skills.