

Introduction

Overt Participant Observation involves participating in the behaviour of people who know they are being studied. The researcher joins the group openly, possibly (but not always) telling its members about the research being undertaken, such as its purpose, scope and so forth, and they carry out research with the permission and co-operation of the group (or, at least, important members of the group).

As a *general research method* participant observation (both covert and, in this instance, overt) has a number of strengths:

It is, for example, a *flexible* research method in the sense that a researcher, because they're not prejudging issues (in terms of what they consider to be important / unimportant), can react to events, follow leads, and develop research avenues that may not have occurred to them before becoming involved with a group.

This method, because of the *depth of involvement* with people's behaviour, has the *potential* to produce *highly valid data* that tells us a great deal about the lives of the people being studied. This partly follows because by their participation and experiences in the group, the researcher can understand, *first-hand*, the influences on people's behaviour, something that has two distinct - and possibly unique - advantages:

1. This general method provides a depth of understanding and insight that can't be achieved by any other research method.
2. By *taking the part of The Other* a researcher can bring their sociological knowledge and understanding to bear on the analysis of the behaviour they are actually *experiencing*.

Strengths

In terms of the specific strengths of **overt participant observation** we can note a number of advantages to being able to join a group with the knowledge and cooperation of its members:

1. Access: In groups that have hierarchical structures (such as a school or large corporation) the researcher can gain access to all levels in the organisation (the boardroom as well as the shop-floor). Although "getting in" to a group in the first place can be a problem (see below) a commonly-used technique is **sponsorship**, whereby the researcher initially gains the trust and cooperation of an important / powerful group member.

Venkatesh's (2009) study of a Black American gang, for example, was made possible by a middle-ranking gang leader called "JT" taking him under his protection (a situation that echoed Whyte's (1943) entrance into an Italian street gang through the sponsorship of its leader "Doc" 60-odd years earlier). JT's sponsorship gave Venkatesh initial access to both lower-ranking gang members and, eventually, some limited access to the gang's most powerful members.

2. Recording data is relatively easy because the group knows and understands the role of the researcher. They can ask questions, take notes and the like without raising the suspicions of the people being researched.

3. Going Native: This method makes it easier to separate the roles of participant *and* observer and reduces the chance of the researcher becoming so involved in a group they stop observing and simply become a participant (*going native*). Even so, **Venkatesh** found there were times he became so involved with the people he was studying he acted “like one of them” as “they would behave” and effectively ceased to be an impartial observer. This occurred quite understandably at times - such as when a rival gang started shooting randomly at people, including Venkatesh, on the street.

4. Validity: The ability to not only ask questions, observe individual behaviours and actually experience the day-to-day life of respondents helps the researcher to build-up a highly-detailed picture of the lives they are describing. This “360 degree” view means the researcher not only gets to understand what people “say they do”, they also get to witness and experience what people *actually* do - which all adds to potential validity.

5. Ethics: Where the observer's role is clearly defined there is less risk of involvement in unethical, criminal, dangerous or destructive behaviours. The researcher can, for example, withdraw from unethical or risky situations without necessarily losing the trust or arousing the suspicions of the people they're researching.

Weaknesses

We can note a range of potential drawbacks to the use of overt participant observation:

1. The Observer Effect: An important general criticism of this approach is that the observer's presence in the group may change (consciously or subconsciously) how people behave. This is a problem because such changes, if indeed they occur, can't be easily quantified. In other words, if we can't be sure that the behaviour being observed is how people normally behave in a given situation this will impact on the validity of the research data.

Such changes, for example, may involve people not doing something they would normally do, because they know it will be recorded by the observer. Alternatively, **Venkatesh** witnessed a “punishment beating” of a low-level gang member that he felt was partly designed to demonstrate the limits of his observational role: higher level gang members were effectively “putting on a show” for his benefit, to demonstrate they still controlled gang behaviour.

2. Levels of participation have two broad dimensions:

- *Under involvement* occurs when the researcher doesn't fully participate in all aspects of group behaviour. The researcher's involvement may not be deep enough to experience the world from the viewpoint of the people being studied. Depth of involvement, in this respect, may also be limited by *ethical* considerations - not participating in criminal behaviour, for example - that may affect the extent to which the researcher is truly experiencing how people “normally behave”.
- *Over-involvement* is a further, if less well-documented, aspect of this weakness; a situation where the researcher “becomes the story” they are reporting; their presence and involvement becomes the *focal point* around which people orientate their behaviour - something they wouldn't do, of course, in the researcher's absence. **Venkatesh**, for example, was given “special treatment” in terms of access to people and places, invitations to meetings and personal access to people he would not have had if he hadn't been identified as a researcher allied to a powerful player within the gang. In some respects, therefore, it could be argued that “Gang Leader for a Day” was less about “The Gang” and a lot about Venkatesh as a researcher...

3. Reliability: Two general reliability issues are raised by this research method:

- Firstly, the research can never be replicated. Although it might be possible to revisit a group, the research could never be exactly repeated.
- Secondly, we have to take it on trust the researcher saw and did the things they claimed to see and do. This isn't to say a researcher would deliberately lie or falsify their research (something that could potentially occur with any piece of research); rather it's to note that it may be difficult to accurately capture every single aspect of the behaviour going on around them in which they may - or may not - be directly involved. In this respect there is the problem of accurately recording behaviour, even with the ability to ask questions, write diaries and the like. No researcher can record and document everything that happens to them and all research - even, or perhaps especially participant observation - involves the selection and interpretation of idea and events.

4. Access: While overt participation may make it easier for a researcher to enter a group, particularly a group where the characteristics of the researcher (class, age, gender, ethnicity and so forth) do not match those of the group being studied, there may still be access problems. These range from the fact a researcher can't always be present - particularly where large and diverse groups are concerned - to personally experience events, to a group refusing the researcher permission to observe them.

5. Skills - such as the ability to fit-into the group or communicate with members on their level and in their terms - and **commitment** are important qualities for the participant observer. In terms of the latter, for example, overt participant observation is necessarily **time-consuming** - not simply in terms of setting-up the observation and participating in the behaviour (which may take weeks or months) but also in analysing and interpreting the data produced by the research. Participant observation, therefore, is not a method to be undertaken lightly and requires massive *personal* and *organisational* commitments on the part of the researcher. **Venkatesh**, for example, spent around 8 years on his study of a *single* gang in a *small area* of *one* American city.

6. Representativeness: While the ability to generalise the data from your research is not necessarily a weakness of the method, participant observation is normally restricted to small-scale, intensive, studies carried out over a long period and the group being studied is unlikely to be representative of any other group. It would be difficult for a researcher to generalise their findings from one group to the next.