

## Task Options



## “Hiding in Plain Sight”

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## Overt Participant Observation

The purpose of this task is to give your students a brief taste of “doing overt participant observation” as part of a simulation designed to help them understand and evaluate this research method.

The following Options are merely suggestions as to how this may be achieved and you are, of course, free to devise and implement your own ideas for such a task - the Options listed below are merely suggestive, not prescriptive.

These Options are designed to be relatively simple to understand, easy to implement and time sensitive: Options 1 and 2 involve students collecting data outside of class time while Option 3 can be integrated into a classroom-based lesson without being too time-consuming.

The first two Options will, however, require a certain amount of preparation and organisation and need to be completed before any work can be done in the classroom. You will, in other words, have to plan the “participation” of your students in advance of actually running the sim in the classroom.

### Option 1

Within your class, pair-off your students. The simulation works most effectively if students who don't socialise with each other outside the class are paired together. One way to do this is through a simple lottery, although you can if you wish allow the students to pick their pair.

Each student in a pair will take it in turns to introduce the other to their wider network of friends as an “overt participant observer” (i.e. as someone who will be observing the group over a short period as part of a “sociology project”).

For example, Student A and Student B are paired.

For the first part of the task, Student A introduces Student B to their friends as someone who will be participating in their network, observing their behaviour and so forth for a short amount of time. Student B will, in some respects, be shadowing Student A (and their friends).

The length of the observation is up to the students, but it should be kept reasonably short. Your students just need to get a taste of being a participant observer.

If you feel your students need guidance on how to play the participant observer role you can give them a specific set of guidelines about what they should be looking for (such as understanding group relationships, why different students chose to study different subjects at a-level or whatever) but this is not essential for the successful completion of the task.

The observation should take place in a situation where both students feel comfortable and safe. Normally this would be on school / college premises but if both students are happy to meet socially outside their workplace this would add a different dimension to the observation. It would also present a different range of problems for the observer, such as how to record data unobtrusively and so forth.

Once the observation is complete the students swap roles. Student B introduces Student A to their friendship network to allow Student A the chance to play the overt participant observer role.

Once all observations have been completed students need to come together as a class to carry-out the real objective of the sim - evaluating overt participant observation as a research method.

*If you have an unequal number of students in your class it might be necessary to have one group with three students.*

*In this instance you simply need to arrange things between the students involved to ensure that each experiences the observer role.*

## Sponsorship

At some point, either before or after the observations are complete, it might be useful to point-out how the idea of “sponsorship”, mimicked by the simulation, is a useful and widely-used technique in overt participant observation.

For background reading you may want to point your students in the direction of famous studies, such as William Whyte’s “Street Corner Society” in the 1940s or, more-recently, Sudir Venkatesh’s “Gang Leader for A Day” [link] to help them understand the importance of sponsorship.

In addition, you can link the above to some of the ways sponsorship is advantageous to the overt participant observer. Sponsors can, for example:

- Help you gain entrance to a group.
- Explain your presence in the group (and why you ask so many questions...).
- Explain why you have left the group.

You may also want to link the above to how sponsorship can help the research solve Goffman’s “3 main problems of participant observation:

- Getting In.
- Staying In.
- Getting Out.

Sponsors also have further advantages for the participant observer, such as:

- offering “protection” in dangerous groups and situations (as Venkatesh, for example, found in his study of gang culture).
- vouching for the observer in the sense of being able to convince those being observed that the observer is present to represent rather than judge.
- getting the observer access to different levels of a group (Venkatesh, again, was able to meet people in the gang he observed because of sponsorship. Without such help he was unlikely to have ever met, on equal terms, those “higher up” the gang hierarchy.

## Option 2

If you have a small class or one where everyone is part of the same broad friendship group a slightly different option is to pair your students with students from another class. Ideally this could be with students from another a-level sociology class (year 1 students with year 2 students for example) but if this isn’t possible you could pair your students with those from a completely separate class.

One of the advantages of this option is that it takes the Overt Participant Observers completely out of their comfort zone, particularly if they don’t know the students with whom they are paired. This gives them a slightly different insight into observational research: that it can be a little precarious and frightening...

*For either of these Options you should ask your students to record their observations, questions and the like in some way (a field diary might be useful here).*

## Option 3

If, for whatever reason, actually doing overt participant observation is not a viable option it’s possible to give your students a taste of what it involves through a Thought Experiment.

This involves devising a plausible scenario and asking your students to imagine what it would be like to carry-out overt participant observation in that situation. While the scenario can be completely fictional, using a real example can be useful.

If you’re familiar with something like Venkatesh’s “[Gang Leader for a Day](#)”, for example, you can base the Thought Experiment on this, with your students asked to imagine themselves in Venkatesh’s position.

In this way you can outline real situations and real examples of the problems he faced in doing his research and students can think about how they might have solved such problems, as compared with Venkatesh’s actual solutions.

## Option 4

It's entirely possible that none of the above Options appeal to you or your students and in this case if you want to run the sim you will need to decide on some alternate way for students to "do the research". They could, for example, take on the role of an overt participant observer in their own home or with their friends. They could attend their other a-level classes "from the viewpoint of a participant observer" and the like.

## Debrief

Once the observations have been completed you can move on to the real objective of the class - assessing overt participant observation as a research method.

How you do this is, of course, up to you but you might like to note a couple of possibilities:

1. Identify a list of the key strengths and weaknesses you would like your students to cover (the Overt Participation Document embedded in the sim covers most of the important ones).

For each, ask students to suggest examples from their observations that illustrate these strengths and weaknesses. In the normal run of events this should prompt some discussion around these ideas and you can formalise them as necessary.

2. An alternative to providing students with a list of strengths and weaknesses is to invite discussion of their research. As they highlight issues, problems, strengths and so forth you can group and record these observations under various headings (such as "Access", "Reliability", "Validity" and so forth).

Whether you do the above - or something similar - the final stage of the simulation is for students to write their Report:

- describe what overt participant observation involves.
- identify the type/s of data it produces.
- identify and explain the strengths and weaknesses of overt participant observation.

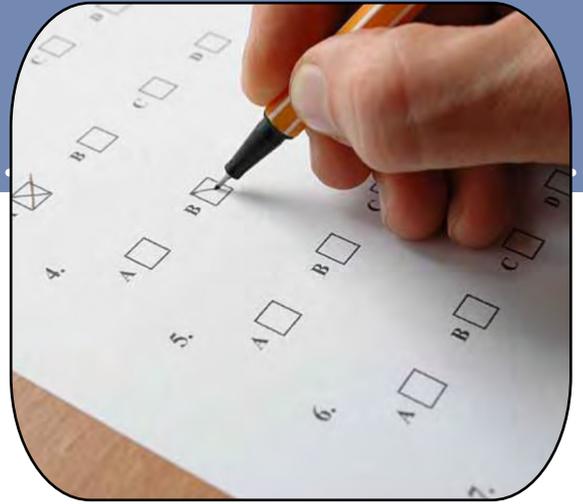
There are documents embedded in the Presentation to help them do this:

- the P.E.R.V.E.R.T. Protocol.
- a discussion of Practical, Ethical and Theoretical Research Considerations.
- the Strengths and Weaknesses of Overt Participant Observation.

Alternatively or additionally you can supply your own materials for this task.

## Note

*This document is part of a larger research methods simulation and is not intended to be a stand-alone document. If you've downloaded it and are wondering what it's for, pop on over to [\[link\]](#) and all will be revealed...*



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