34. Participant observation and ethnography

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Definition

Participant observation is a method used in social science research in which one observes people while participating in their activities, i.e., passively, rather than actively enlisting them into a research-focused activity through an interview, a questionnaire or another participatory research method. The goal is to ascertain practical, extra-verbal, or routine aspects of peoples' lives, including particularities and contextual factors that other methods omit or exclude. Ethnography is an intensive form of participant observation, primarily distinguished by a longer duration (months to years) of sustained interaction. The goal of ethnography is to see the world through the eyes of the people being studied, so to speak, attaining effective fluency in their language and sympathetic understanding of their norms, practices, and worldviews.

The basics of participant observation and ethnography

The core principle of participant observation and ethnography (PO/E) is that many social phenomena can only be accessed for study via participation in relevant activities and development of relationships with the people involved. The reasons for this are both practical and epistemological. It would be awkward or rude to study a cultural ritual such as a marriage, funeral or religious celebration without participating in it, for example—participation here meaning (at a minimum) respectful conformity of comportment and behaviour during the event. Similarly, many things about ordinary livelihood activities can only be studied by 'going along' with the people performing them, as doing

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0418.34

otherwise would interfere with or prevent the activity itself. This is the sense in which PO/E tends to be passive. Finally, there are major dimensions of social reality, such as meaning and value, that are so semi- or subconscious, embodied, or symbolic in nature as to escape an outsider's apprehension in the absence of sustained immersion.

Participant observation and ethnography in depth

Anthropology is the discipline most closely associated with PO/E; indeed, the elevation of ethnography to the status of method by the likes of Marcel Mauss, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski may be said to mark the advent of anthropology as a scholarly discipline (as distinct from the de facto ethnography practiced out of necessity by countless travellers, traders and explorers through the ages). Prolonged co-residence and acquisition of native languages were practical necessities in settings where transportation was arduous and interpreters non-existent. The scientific virtues of PO/E are not limited to such contexts, however, and the method is now used across the interpretative social sciences for understanding virtually any group of people, including political and economic elites, scientists, bureaucrats, activists, migrants, members of specific social or occupational categories, and communities impacted by climate change, conflict or other dislocations.

More so than other methods, PO/E is difficult to learn from a book or class; doing it in practice is widely seen as the only way to develop the requisite skills, dispositions and relationships. One reason for this is that all people and communities are particular and unique in at least some ways; even if a researcher wishes to study them as members of a group or tokens of a type (e.g., rural youth, tribal elders, factory workers, etc.), they are unavoidably also individuals who must be approached and treated as such. Thus, there are a handful of prescriptive steps for successful PO/E (cultivate multiple informants; take copious notes, and update them before going to sleep each night; be vigilant in securing and backing up/duplicating your notes; review your notes often, including in the field), but the key principles are social in nature. Above all, PO/E depends on trusting interpersonal relationships, which require mutual respect sustained over time; trust develops slowly

but can be lost very quickly. Patience is advisable; one can expect to encounter people repeatedly, and what they share will likely deepen (and possibly change) over time. Thus, for methodological as well as ethical reasons, credibility is paramount; ethnographers must be honest about the purposes of their research, good for their word, and genuine in their self-presentation.

Why is participant observation and ethnography important?

Most simply, many social phenomena cannot be apprehended by other scientific methods. There are at least three additional reasons that PO/E is important. First, no other method is as open-ended with regard to its questions and categories. Every researcher must already have questions and categories in order to get started, but the radical inductiveness of PO/E allows for one's questions and categories to be challenged, re-worked or even discarded. It is thus more likely than other methods to uncover phenomena or hypotheses that are novel or unanticipated by the researcher. Second, all quantitative research ultimately rests on qualitative claims or assumptions (Sayer 1984), and whereas quantitative methods with large sample sizes can identify patterns in social phenomena, PO/E is more likely to reveal the qualitative mechanisms underlying those patterns. Third, PO/E is better equipped than other methods to cope with what may be the most distinctive feature of human beings as compared to other research objects: the capacity and propensity to lie or mislead, not only to the researcher but also to oneself. Intentionally or not, it is both easy and common for people to invent answers to researchers' questions in one-off encounters such as polls and surveys, especially where power asymmetries are pronounced (in either direction). It is also often true that what people say they do and what they actually do align imperfectly. By its direct observation and prolonged and iterative nature, PO/E is more likely to reveal and overcome "the chasm between discourse and practice" (Bobrow-Strain 2007: 26) that inheres in everyday life and social relations. Indeed, according to critical social theorists from Marx and DuBois to Gramsci and Bourdieu, these discrepancies are integral to the reproduction and naturalisation of social domination.

Relationship of participant observation and ethnography with other methods

PO/E is often employed in combination with archival methods (Cope, Chapter 22) to establish the historical origins or context of present-day social relations. Indeed, a similar sort of hermeneutic practice is often useful in both, working back and forth between one's own semiotic system and that of one's research subjects (living or dead). PO/E is also highly synergistic with case-study or intensive research (Lane, Chapter 24) and the various methods pursuant thereto. Fairhead and Leach (1996), for example, combined ethnography with remote sensing, archival analysis, village surveys, and ecological transects in an outstanding example of critical interdisciplinary research. Finally, semi-structured or open-ended interviews (see Johnston and Longhurst, Chapter 32) may also complement PO/E as a means of initiating longer-term relationships or for individuals whose position or circumstances do not allow for sustained co-participation. Focus groups (Longhurst and Johnston, Chapter 27) may serve a similar purpose, although in general they are almost diametrically opposed to PO/E because they intentionally remove people from their everyday lives.

Ethical issues with participant observation and ethnography

The ethical issues associated with PO/E are significant and complex. The particularity of detail made available by ethnography can make protecting the identities of research subjects difficult, even impossible, especially within their own communities. Ethnographic research can also lead to close personal friendships, introducing potential conflicts of interest or biases in interpretation. More fundamental issues arise from power asymmetries that often attend and enable PO/E. Early anthropologists routinely benefited from extremely unequal terms of engagement, from access to transport, money and market goods to membership in (and sometimes sponsorship by) colonial governments. Moreover, these power relations were ignored or omitted in the discipline's publications and self-understanding for decades. As long as academic researchers enjoy structural advantages vis-à-vis many populations, the potential for extractive relationships will remain. That said, subaltern groups may see scholars as valuable allies or spokespeople for their causes

and needs, and PO/E can also be employed to expose and demystify elites by "studying up"—provided that access can be secured (Nader 1974 [1969]). Finally, if PO/E affords insight into power asymmetries, it also can give rise to political entanglements. Researchers may develop strong feelings of gratitude and obligation toward the individuals, communities, and causes they engaged while conducting PO/E, and they may come to be viewed as spokespeople and advocates rather than dispassionate scholars.

Issues to be aware of in using participant observation and ethnography

In addition to ethical issues, PO/E entails important epistemological challenges, ones reflected more widely in case study-based research (see Lane, Chapter 24). Foremost are questions of representativeness and generalisability: one cannot assume that the particular case one has chosen to study will directly reveal broader facts or substantiate claims about a larger group of apparently similar cases. Indeed, by studying one case in intimate detail, PO/E is likely to uncover any number of idiosyncrasies or particularities that problematise extrapolation. Parallel issues arise in any effort to derive causal claims, as the array of contextual or contributing factors outruns any attempt at strict reduction or control. Alternative theoretical frameworks emphasising relationality, process, and a dialectic of contingency and determination (what Anthony Giddens (2014) terms "structuration") are better suited to PO/E than positivist inference or hypothesis testing. All of these considerations must be taken into account from the very beginning to ensure that research questions are suited to the method. Finally, the effort to see the world through others' eyes often lays bare one's own preconceptions, revealing as much about oneself as about others. Such reflexivity is salutary, but it has also been known to result in navel-gazing paralysis.

Suggested further reading

There are numerous websites dedicated to PO/E, including some maintained by university Institutional Review Boards to assist researchers in complying with protocols for the protection of human

subjects. For a succinct, open-source discussion of ethnography, see Sangasubana, N. 2011. 'How to conduct ethnographic research', *The Qualitative Report*, 16.2, pp. 567–73, http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR16-2/sangasubanat.pdf

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