

Participant Observation

Observation involves the sociologist just **watching** what is happening and writing up what he/she sees. In **participant** observation, the researcher joins in with the activities of the group.

It can be **overt** where the researcher tells the group he/she is observing them, or **covert** where they are unaware they are being watched because the researcher is pretending to be one of the group.

Observation has been used effectively to study many different groups. It has many advantages:

- it allows the sociologist to study groups that are deviant and who would refuse to fill in a questionnaire or be interviewed. By using covert observation, sociologists have been able to study teenage gangs and drug suppliers;
- it allows the sociologist to study people in their natural setting without them being influenced by the presence of the researcher;
- it can provide **detailed** information about particular groups or situations. This kind of data can 'fill out' and provide a richer understanding than questionnaires which tend to produce less detailed information about a large number of people; and
- a lot of what people do, they 'take for granted' and are unaware of. For example, studies have shown that teachers pay more attention to boys than girls in the classroom. Teachers may be unaware of this, so would not admit to this in an interview or questionnaire.

The type of data collected by observation is referred to as **qualitative** data. This means that it is written and **descriptive** as opposed to statistical.

One of the biggest advantages of observation is that the data collected is quite high in **validity**. Validity refers to how accurate or true to life the data is and whether it is actually describing what is going on. Observation tends to produce valid data because of all the reasons above.

Consider the following account written by James Patrick, obtained by observing a teenage gang in Glasgow. It is doubtful whether he could have got this rich, detailed, qualitative account from any other method of research.

Participant Observation

James Patrick, *A Glasgow Gang Observed*

James Patrick was a teacher at an approved school in Scotland. He took up the invitation by Tim – a sixteen-year-old juvenile offender – to come and see for himself ‘whit the score wis’ in the ‘Young team’ (a Glasgow street gang of which Tim was leader).

Patrick, posing as Tim’s friend from the approved school, took up this challenge. Having been briefed by Tim on the appropriate style of dress and considering himself aware of the local dialect and slang (an assumption which was to prove his first mistake), Patrick met and joined the gang.

Patrick argues that his work offers a descriptive account of life in a gang, which he met on twelve occasions between October 1966 and January 1967. He writes,

In all I spent just under 120 hours in the field. As my involvement with the gang deepened, so the hours lengthened until towards the end of January I was in the company of the gang during one weekend from seven o’clock on Friday evening until six on Sunday morning.

I have deliberately allowed some years to pass between the completion of the fieldwork and publication. The main reasons for the delay have been my interest in self-preservation, my desire to protect the members of the gang and my fear of exacerbating the gang situation in Glasgow, which was receiving nationwide attention in 1968 and 1969. Reasons of personal safety also dictate the use of a pseudonym.

What follows is not a study of Glasgow, or of Glasgow youth in general, or of a particular community within the city. It is a small-scale piece of research which is in no way a statistical survey and so the conclusions may well be of a restricted character.

How does this make his work restricted and unrepresentative?

Before meeting the gang Patrick had to prepare for making an entry.

I began to concentrate on making my physical appearance acceptable to the group. I was prepared to give my age as seventeen although this point was never questioned. In fact I was able to pass myself off as a mate of a fifteen-year-old boy; my exact age remained indeterminate but apparently acceptable. Clothes were another major difficulty. I was already aware of the importance attached to them by gang members in the school and so, after discussion with Tim, I bought the suit I have described in the first paragraph. Even here I made two mistakes. Firstly, I bought the suit outright with cash instead of paying it up, thus attracting both attention to myself in the shop and disbelief in the gang when I innocently mentioned the fact. Secondly, during my first night out with the gang, I fastened the middle button of my jacket, as I am accustomed to do. Tim was quick to spot the mistake. The boys in the gang fastened only the top button; with this arrangement they can stand with their hands in their trouser pockets and their jackets buttoned.

Participant Observation

What might have happened if Patrick had not paid attention to these points?

Once he was accepted into the gang, Patrick began recording his observations and these make illuminating reading about life in a gang. Here are some examples of the types of incidents he records.

Saturday afternoon

Tim began walking with the others trailing behind him. We had been walking for some time 'jist dossin', when Tim had an idea, "Let's get right intae that Lib'ry" he said, pointing to one of Glasgow's public libraries.

Running into the building we ignored the lending section because of its turnstile and burst into the reading room. Dan McDade and Billy Morton began setting fire to the newspapers on display, as Tim and the others pushed books off tables and emptied shelves of encyclopaedias and reference books. I kept the edge up at the outer door and shouted 'Polis' as soon as I dared. Dave Malloy was trying to set alight the newspapers being read by old-age pensioners or down-and-outs. One old man beside the door, wearing woollen gloves with the finger pieces cut out, was reading with his face screwed up against the print which he deciphered with the aid of a magnifying glass. Jimmy Barrow's last act was to knock this glass from the man's hand as he ran past. En route to the street, a male attendant in a green uniform was punched and kicked out of the way. Some behind me could hardly run for laughing.

What do these extracts tell us about life in the gang?

Weapons

The Malloys* boasted of being able to outwit any policeman who searched them. Tim, for instance, claimed to have been 'raked' one night while 'kerryin' and to have escaped arrest for possessing an offensive weapon. The trick he had picked up from his elder brothers, none of whom had ever been caught in possession. Before leaving the house, John used to tie a short blade to his wrist with a piece of string; he then concealed it by rolling down his shirt sleeve over the knife, which rested alongside his forearm. Tim adopted the same technique, but in addition, was fond of carrying his favourite weapon – an open, lock-back razor. Harry Johnstone thought this 'sleekit'. At nights when they met, Harry would ask Tim, "Are you kerryin?" "Me kerryin?" "Are ye kiddin?" Yet in a fight, I was told, "a wee blade comes oot oan the sleekit – a wee lock-back or something".

* two brothers

Rivalry between gangs

Both sides now wanted a showdown. Tim's 'goin oan the creep' was considered by some of the more peripheral members of the Young Team as despicable as 'chibbin lassies', but they were circumspect

Participant Observation

in not voicing their opinions too loudly. The only solution, Tim thought, was 'tae battle it oot'. During Christmas week, the gang talk became more frenzied. The pros and cons of various battlefields were discussed. It was up to the Barnes Road* to make the first move. "They says they're comin' up tae oor pitch bu' they're aye sayin' it an' they never dae". In this climate of mounting excitement every boy in the area within the influence of the Fleet and all other associated gangs had been alerted and told to be armed. As one of their number, I was handed a hatchet.

My reluctance to carry weapons, noticed earlier, now aroused hostility. The situation had not been helped by my taking a back seat during the action. Dave Malloy was my principal accuser; whenever the conversation allowed it, he never failed to make a jeering remark at my expense. The sneering had turned to pushing and jostling and a 'square-go' between us was on the cards. Without Tim's constant intervention on my behalf I would have been unable to sustain my role.

*a rival gang

What dilemmas did Patrick face as a result of being a covert observer?

Are these dilemmas inevitable with covert observation?

The party

At the party in January, Tim was presented with twenty-odd pills and took four right away. A few of these half-red, half-black pellets were pressed upon me and I was invited to sample these 'Black Bombers'. Putting two in my mouth I stuck them to the inside of my cheek and drank deeply from a can of lager. Only one of the pills stayed in place and I spat it out at the first available opportunity. But by then only the capsule was left and the white powder covered my tongue.

This experience provided me with the opening I needed and for once Tim spoke at length on the subject. After being in the clouds, he dreaded the horrors of the following morning. "Ye imagine everythin yir frightened fur. Chibbin somewan tae death in the street wi everybody at the windaes watchin' who's dain' it – and the police chasin' ye and you runnin' fur miles an' miles."

Patrick relies on his memory to record his observations. What problems does this present?

Questions

Try to refer to sociological concepts such as validity in at least one answer.

1. What type of observation did Patrick use?

Participant Observation

2. Why didn't Patrick tell the group he was researching them?

3. Why did Patrick remain in the group for such a long time?

4. Do you think Patrick was in any danger? Explain your answer.

5. Do you think Patrick's findings of the group are **valid**? Explain your answer.

6. Would a questionnaire have obtained similar findings? Explain your answer.

Participant Observation

- 7. One of the problems associated with observation is its **reliability**. This refers to whether a different researcher would have produced different findings. Do you think Patrick's findings are reliable? Explain your answer.

Disadvantages of participant observation

As we have seen, there are many advantages of using observation as a method. However, there are also problems.

Using your ideas and the textbook, see if you can identify five problems. Use the concepts of validity, reliability, ethics and representativeness.

WEAKNESSES

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