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Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method

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Abstract: Observation, particularly participant observation, has been used in a variety of disciplines as a tool for collecting data about people, processes, and cultures in qualitative research. This paper provides a look at various definitions of participant observation, the history of its use, the purposes for which it is used, the stances of the observer, and when, what, and how to observe. Information on keeping field notes and writing them up is also discussed, along with some exercises for teaching observation techniques to researchers-in-training.

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1. Introduction

Participant observation, for many years, has been a hallmark of both anthropological and sociological studies. In recent years, the field of education has seen an increase in the number of qualitative studies that include participant observation as a way to collect information. Qualitative methods of data collection, such as interviewing, observation, and document analysis, have been included under the umbrella term of "ethnographic methods" in recent years. The purpose of this paper is to discuss observation, particularly participant observation, as a tool for collecting data in qualitative research studies. Aspects of observation discussed herein include various definitions of participant observation, some history of its use, the purposes for which such observation is used, the stances or roles of the observer, and additional information about when, what, and how to observe. Further information is provided to address keeping field notes and their use in writing up the final story. [1]

2. Definitions

MARSHALL and ROSSMAN (1989) define observation as "the systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study" (p.79). Observations enable the researcher to describe existing situations using the five senses, providing a "written photograph" of the situation under study (ERLANDSON, HARRIS, SKIPPER, & ALLEN, 1993). DeMUNCK and SOBO (1998) describe participant observation as the primary method used by anthropologists doing fieldwork. Fieldwork involves "active looking, improving memory, informal interviewing, writing detailed field notes, and perhaps most importantly, patience" (DeWALT & DeWALT, 2002, p.vii). Participant observation is the process enabling researchers to learn about the activities of the people under study in the natural setting through observing and participating in those activities. It provides the context for development of sampling guidelines and interview guides (DeWALT & DeWALT, 2002). SCHENSUL, SCHENSUL, and LeCOMPTE (1999) define participant observation as "the process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the researcher setting" (p.91). [2]

BERNARD (1994) adds to this understanding, indicating that participant observation requires a certain amount of deception and impression management. Most anthropologists, he notes, need to maintain a sense of objectivity through distance. He defines participant observation as the process of establishing rapport within a community and learning to act in such a way as to blend into the community so that its members will act naturally, then removing oneself from the setting or community to immerse oneself in the data to understand what is going on and be able to write about it. He includes more than just observation in the process of being a participant observer; he includes observation, natural conversations, interviews of various sorts, checklists, questionnaires, and unobtrusive methods. Participant observation is characterized by such actions as having an open, nonjudgmental attitude, being interested in learning more about others, being aware of the propensity for feeling culture shock and for making mistakes, the majority of which can be overcome, being a careful observer and a good listener, and being open to the unexpected in what is learned (DeWALT & DeWALT, 1998). [3]

FINE (2003) uses the term "peopled ethnography" to describe text that provides an understanding of the setting and that describes theoretical implications through the use of vignettes, based on field notes from observations, interviews, and products of the group members. He suggests that ethnography is most effective when one observes the group being studied in settings that enable him/her to "explore the organized routines of behavior" (p.41). FINE, in part, defines "peopled ethnography" as being based on extensive observation in the field, a labor-intensive activity that sometimes lasts for years. In this description of the observation process, one is expected to become a part of the group being studied to the extent that the members themselves include the observer in the activity and turn to the observer for information about how the group is operating. He also indicates that it is at this point, when members begin to ask the observer questions about the group and when they begin to include the observer in the "gossip," that it is time to leave the field. This process he describes of becoming a part of the community, while observing their behaviors and activities, is called participant observation. [4]

3. The History of Participant Observation as a Method

Participant observation is considered a staple in anthropological studies, especially in ethnographic studies, and has been used as a data collection method for over a century. As DeWALT and DeWALT (2002) relate it, one of the first instances of its use involved the work of Frank Hamilton CUSHING, who spent four and a half years as a participant observer with the Zuni Pueblo people around 1879 in a study for the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of Ethnology. During this time, CUSHING learned the language, participated in the customs, was adopted by a pueblo, and was initiated into the priesthood. Because he did not publish extensively about this culture, he was criticized as having gone native, meaning that he had lost his objectivity and, therefore, his ability to write analytically about the culture. My own experience conducting research in indigenous communities, which began about ten years ago with my own ethnographic doctoral dissertation on Muscogee (Creek) women's perceptions of work (KAWULICH, 1998) and has continued in the years since (i.e., KAWULICH, 2004), leads me to believe that, while this may have been the case, it is also possible that he held the Zuni people in such high esteem that he felt it impolitic or irreverent to do so. In my own research, I have been hesitant to write about religious ceremonies or other aspects of indigenous culture that I have observed, for example, for fear of relating information that my participants or other community members might feel should not be shared. When I first began conducting my ethnographic study of the Muscogee culture, I was made aware of several incidents in which researchers were perceived to have taken information they had obtained through interviews or observations and had published their findings without permission of the Creek people or done so without giving proper credit to the participants who had shared their lives with the researchers. [5]

A short time later, in 1888, Beatrice Potter WEBB studied poor neighborhoods during the day and returned to her privileged lifestyle at night. She took a job as a rent collector to interact with the people in buildings and offices and took a job as a seamstress in a sweatshop to better understand their lives. Then, in the early 1920s, MALINOWSKI studied and wrote about his participation and observation of the Trobriands, a study BERNARD (1998) calls one of the most cited early discussions of anthropological data collection methods. Around the same time, Margaret MEAD studied the lives of adolescent Samoan girls. MEAD's approach to data collection differed from that of her mentor, anthropologist Frank BOAS, who emphasized the use of historical texts and materials to document disappearing native cultures. Instead, MEAD participated in the living culture to record their cultural activities, focusing on specific activities, rather than participating in the activities of the culture overall as did MALINOWSKI. By 1874, the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain had published a manual of methods called *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, which was subsequently revised several times until 1971 (BERNARD, 1998). [6]

STOCKING (1983, as cited in DeWALT & DeWALT, 2002) divided participant observation as an ethnographic method of data collection into three phases: participation, observation, and interrogation, pointing out that MALINOWSKI and MEAD both emphasized the use of observation and interrogation, but not participation. He suggests that both MEAD and MALINOWSKI held positions of power within the culture that enabled them to collect data from a position of privilege. While ethnographers traditionally tried to understand others by observing them and writing detailed accounts of others' lives from an outsider viewpoint, more recently, sociologists have taken a more insider viewpoint by studying groups in their own cultures. These sociological studies have brought into question the stance or positioning of the observer and generated more creative approaches to lending voice to others in the presentation of the findings of their studies (GAITAN, 2000). By the 1940s, participant observation was widely used by both anthropologists and sociologists. The previously noted studies were some of the first to use the process of participant observation to obtain data for understanding various cultures and, as such, are considered to be required reading in anthropology classes. [7]

4. Why Use Observation to Collect Data?

Observation methods are useful to researchers in a variety of ways. They provide researchers with ways to check for nonverbal expression of feelings, determine who interacts with whom, grasp how participants communicate with each other, and check for how much time is spent on various activities (SCHMUCK, 1997). Participant observation allows researchers to check definitions of terms that participants use in interviews, observe events that informants may be unable or unwilling to share when doing so would be impolitic, impolite, or insensitive, and observe situations informants have described in interviews, thereby making them aware of distortions or inaccuracies in description provided by those informants (MARSHALL & ROSSMAN, 1995). [8]

DeWALT and DeWALT (2002) believe that "the goal for design of research using participant observation as a method is to develop a holistic understanding of the phenomena under study that is as objective and accurate as possible given the limitations of the method" (p.92). They suggest that participant observation be used as a way to increase the validity[1] of the study, as observations may help the researcher have a better understanding of the context and phenomenon under

1 Validity is a term typically associated with quantitative research; however, when viewed in terms of its meaning of reflecting what is purported to be measured/observed, its use is appropriate. Validity in this instance may refer to context validity, face validity or trustworthiness as described by LINCOLN and GUBA (1994).

study. Validity is stronger with the use of additional strategies used with observation, such as interviewing, document analysis, or surveys, questionnaires, or other more quantitative methods. Participant observation can be used to help answer descriptive research questions, to build theory, or to generate or test hypotheses (DeWALT & DeWALT, 2002). [9]

When designing a research study and determining whether to use observation as a data collection method, one must consider the types of questions guiding the study, the site under study, what opportunities are available at the site for observation, the representativeness of the participants of the population at that site, and the strategies to be used to record and analyze the data (DeWALT & DeWALT, 2002). [10]

Participant observation is a beginning step in ethnographic studies. SCHENSUL, SCHENSUL, and LeCOMPTE (1999) list the following reasons for using participant observation in research:

- to identify and guide relationships with informants;
- to help the researcher get the feel for how things are organized and prioritized, how people interrelate, and what are the cultural parameters;
- to show the researcher what the cultural members deem to be important in manners, leadership, politics, social interaction, and taboos;
- to help the researcher become known to the cultural members, thereby easing facilitation of the research process; and
- to provide the researcher with a source of questions to be addressed with participants (p.91). [11]

BERNARD (1994) lists five reasons for including participant observation in cultural studies, all of which increase the study's validity:

1. It makes it possible to collect different types of data. Being on site over a period of time familiarizes the researcher to the community, thereby facilitating involvement in sensitive activities to which he/she generally would not be invited.
2. It reduces the incidence of "reactivity" or people acting in a certain way when they are aware of being observed.
3. It helps the researcher to develop questions that make sense in the native language or are culturally relevant.
4. It gives the researcher a better understanding of what is happening in the culture and lends credence to one's interpretations of the observation. Participant observation also enables the researcher to collect both quantitative and qualitative data through surveys and interviews.
5. It is sometimes the only way to collect the right data for one's study (pp.142-3). [12]

5. Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Participant Observation

DeMUNCK and SOBO (1998) provide several advantages of using participant observation over other methods of data collection. These include that it affords access to the "backstage culture" (p.43); it allows for richly detailed description, which they interpret to mean that one's goal of describing "behaviors, intentions, situations, and events as understood by one's informants" is highlighted (p.43); and it provides opportunities for viewing or participating in unscheduled events. DeWALT and DeWALT (2002) add that it improves the quality of data collection and interpretation and facilitates the development of new research questions or hypotheses (p.8). [13]

DeMUNCK and SOBO also share several disadvantages of using participation as a method, including that sometimes the researcher may not be interested in what happens out of the public eye and that one must rely on the use of key informants. The MEAD-FREEMAN[2] controversy illustrates how different researchers gain different understanding of what they observe, based on the key informant(s) used in the study. Problems related to representation of events and the subsequent interpretations may occur when researchers select key informants who are similar to them or when the informants are community leaders or marginal participants (DeMUNCK & SOBO, 1998). To alleviate this potential bias problem, BERNARD (1994) suggests pretesting informants or selecting participants who are culturally competent in the topic being studied. [14]

JOHNSON and SACKETT (1998) discuss participant observation as a source of erroneous description in behavioral research. They note that the information collected by anthropologists is not representative of the culture, as much of the data collected by these researchers is observed based on the researcher's individual interest in a setting or behavior, rather than being representative of what actually happens in a culture. For example, they report that more data has been collected about political/religious activities than about eating/sleeping activities, because the political/religious activities are more interesting to researchers than eating/sleeping activities; yet, the amount of time the cultural members spent on political/religious activities was less than 3%, while the amount of time they spent eating/sleeping was greater than 60%. Such actions skew the description of cultural activities. To alleviate this problem, they advocate the use of systematic observation procedures to incorporate rigorous techniques for sampling and recording behavior that keep researchers from neglecting certain aspects of culture. Their definition of structured observation directs who is observed, when and where they are observed, what is observed, and how the observations are recorded, providing a more quantitative observation than participant observation. [15]

2 Many years after MEAD studied the Samoan girls, FREEMAN replicated MEAD's study and derived different interpretations. FREEMAN's study suggested that MEAD's informants had misled her by telling her what they wanted her to believe, rather than what was truthful about their activities.

5.1 Limitations of observation

Several researchers have noted the limitations involved with using observations as a tool for data collection. For example, DeWALT and DeWALT (2002) note that male and female researchers have access to different information, as they have access to different people, settings, and bodies of knowledge. Participant observation is conducted by a biased human who serves as the instrument for data collection; the researcher must understand how his/her gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and theoretical approach may affect observation, analysis, and interpretation. [16]

SCHENSUL, SCHENSUL, and LeCOMPTE (1999) refer to participation as meaning almost total immersion in an unfamiliar culture to study others' lives through the researcher's participation as a full-time resident or member, though they point out that most observers are not full participants in community life. There are a number of things that affect whether the researcher is accepted in the community, including one's appearance, ethnicity, age, gender, and class, for example. Another factor they mention that may inhibit one's acceptance relates to what they call the structural characteristics—that is, those mores that exist in the community regarding interaction and behavior (p.93). Some of the reasons they mention for a researcher's not being included in activities include a lack of trust, the community's discomfort with having an outsider there, potential danger to either the community or the researcher, and the community's lack of funds to further support the researcher in the research. Some of the ways the researcher might be excluded include the community members' use of a language that is unfamiliar to the researcher, their changing from one language to another that is not understood by the researcher, their changing the subject when the researcher arrives, their refusal to answer certain questions, their moving away from the researcher to talk out of ear shot, or their failure to invite the researcher to social events. [17]

SCHENSUL, SCHENSUL, and LeCOMPTE further point out that all researchers should expect to experience a feeling of having been excluded at some point in the research process, particularly in the beginning. The important thing, they note, is for the researcher to recognize what that exclusion means to the research process and that, after the researcher has been in the community for a while, the community is likely to have accepted the researcher to some degree. [18]

Another limitation involved in conducting observations is noted by DeWALT, DeWALT, and WAYLAND (1998). The researcher must determine to what extent he/she will participate in the lives of the participants and whether to intervene in a situation. Another potential limitation they mention is that of researcher bias. They note that, unless ethnographers use other methods than just participant observation, there is likelihood that they will fail to report the negative aspects of the cultural members. They encourage the novice researcher to practice reflexivity at the beginning of one's research to help him/her understand the biases he/she has that may interfere with correct interpretation of what is observed. Researcher bias is one of the aspects of qualitative research that has led to the view that qualitative research is subjective, rather than objective. According to RATNER (2002), some qualitative researchers believe that one cannot be both objective and subjective, while others believe that the two can coexist, that one's subjectivity can facilitate understanding the world of others. He notes that, when one reflects on one's biases, he/she can then recognize those biases that may distort understanding and replace them with those that help him/her to be more objective. In this way, he suggests, the researcher is being respectful of the participants by using a variety of methods to ensure that what he/she thinks is being said, in fact, matches the understanding of the participant. BREUER and ROTH (2003) use a variety of methods for knowledge production, including, for example, positioning or various points of view, different frames of reference, such as special or temporal relativity, perceptual schemata based on experience, and interaction with the social context—understanding that any interaction changes the observed object. Using different approaches to data collection and observation, in particular, leads to richer understanding of the social context and the participants therein. [19]

SCHENSUL, SCHENSUL, and LeCOMPTE (1999) also suggest that observation is filtered through one's interpretive frames and that "the most accurate observations are shaped by formative theoretical frameworks and scrupulous attention to detail" (p.95). The quality of the participant observation depends upon the skill of the researcher to observe, document, and interpret what has been observed. It is important in the early stages of the research process for the researcher to make accurate observation field notes without imposing preconceived categories from the researcher's theoretical perspective, but allow them to emerge from the community under study (see Section 10). [20]

6. The Stances of the Observer

The degree to which the researcher involves himself/herself in participation in the culture under study makes a difference in the quality and amount of data he/she will be able to collect. GOLD (1958) has provided a description of observer stances that extend Buford JUNKER's explanation of four theoretical stances for researchers conducting field observations. GOLD relates the four observation stances as follows:

1. At one extreme is the *complete participant*, who is a member of the group being studied and who conceals his/her researcher role from the group to avoid disrupting normal activity. The disadvantages of this stance are that the researcher may lack objectivity, the group members may feel distrustful of the researcher when the research role is revealed, and the ethics of the situation are questionable, since the group members are being deceived.
2. In the *participant as observer* stance, the researcher is a member of the group being studied, and the group is aware of the research activity. In this stance, the researcher is a participant in the group who is observing others and who is interested more in observing than in participating, as his/her participation is a given, since he/she is a member of the group. This role also has

disadvantages, in that there is a trade off between the depth of the data revealed to the researcher and the level of confidentiality provided to the group for the information they provide.

3. The *observer as participant* stance enables the researcher to participate in the group activities as desired, yet the main role of the researcher in this stance is to collect data, and the group being studied is aware of the researcher's observation activities. In this stance, the researcher is an observer who is not a member of the group and who is interested in participating as a means for conducting better observation and, hence, generating more complete understanding of the group's activities. MERRIAM (1998) points out that, while the researcher may have access to many different people in this situation from whom he/she may obtain information, the group members control the level of information given. As ADLER and ADLER (1994, p.380) note, this "peripheral membership role" enables the researcher to "observe and interact closely enough with members to establish an insider's identity without participating in those activities constituting the core of group membership."
4. The opposite extreme stance from the complete participant is the *complete observer*, in which the researcher is completely hidden from view while observing or when the researcher is in plain sight in a public setting, yet the public being studied is unaware of being observed. In either case, the observation in this stance is unobtrusive and unknown to participants. [21]

Of these four stances, the role providing the most ethical approach to observation is that of the observer as participant, as the researcher's observation activities are known to the group being studied, yet the emphasis for the researcher is on collecting data, rather than participating in the activity being observed. [22]

MERRIAM (1998) calls the stance of participant observer a "schizophrenic activity" (p.103), because the researcher participates in the setting under study, but not to the extent that he/she becomes too absorbed to observe and analyze what is happening. The question frequently is asked, should the researcher be concerned about his/her role of participant observer affecting the situation. MERRIAM (1998) suggests that the question is not whether the process of observing affects the situation or the participants, but how the researcher accounts for those effects in explaining the data. Participant observation is more difficult than simply observing without participation in the activity of the setting, since it usually requires that the field notes be jotted down at a later time, after the activity has concluded. Yet there are situations in which participation is required for understanding. Simply observing without participating in the action may not lend itself to one's complete understanding of the activity. [23]

DeWALT and DeWALT provide an alternative view of the roles the participant observer may take, by comparing the various stances of observation through membership roles described by both SPRADLEY (1980, pp.58-62) and ADLER and ADLER (1987). SPRADLEY describes the various roles that observers may take, ranging in degree of participation from non-participation (activities are observed from outside the research setting) to passive participation (activities are observed in the setting but without participation in activities) to moderate participation (activities are observed in the setting with almost complete participation in activities) to complete participation (activities are observed in the setting with complete participation in the culture). ADLER and ADLER similarly describe the range of membership roles to include peripheral membership, active membership, and full membership. Those serving in a peripheral membership role observe in the setting but do not participate in activities, while active membership roles denote the researcher's participation in certain or all activities, and full membership is reflected by fully participating in the culture. The degree to which the researcher may participate may be determined by the researcher or by the community (DeWALT & DeWALT, 2002). [24]

Other factors that may affect the degree to which one may participate in the culture include the researcher's age, gender, class, and ethnicity. One also must consider the limitations of participating in activities that are dangerous or illegal.

> "The key point is that researchers should be aware of the compromises in access, objectivity, and community expectation that are being made at any particular place along the continuum. Further, in the writing of ethnography, the particular place of the researcher on this continuum should be made clear" (DeWALT & DeWALT, 2002 p.23). [25]

7. How Does One Know What to Observe?

MERRIAM (1998) suggests that the most important factor in determining what a researcher should observe is the researcher's purpose for conducting the study in the first place. "Where to begin looking depends on the research question, but where to focus or stop action cannot be determined ahead of time" (MERRIAM, 1998, p.97). [26]

To help the researcher know what to observe, DeWALT and DeWALT (2002) suggest that he/she study what is happening and why; sort out the regular from the irregular activities; look for variation to view the event in its entirety from a variety of viewpoints; look for the negative cases or exceptions; and, when behaviors exemplify the theoretical purposes for the observation, seek similar opportunities for observation and plan systematic observations of those events/behaviors. Over time, such events may change, with the season, for example, so persistent observation of activities or events that one has already observed may be necessary. [27]

WOLCOTT (2001) suggests that fieldworkers ask themselves if they are making good use of the opportunity to learn what it is they want to know. He further advises that fieldworkers ask themselves if what they want to learn makes the best use of the opportunity presented. [28]

8. How Does One Conduct an Observation?

WHYTE (1979) notes that, while there is no one way that is best for conducting research using participant observation, the most effective work is done by researchers who view informants as collaborators; to do otherwise, he adds, is a waste of human resources. His emphasis is on the relationship between the researcher and informants as collaborative researchers who, through building solid relationships, improve the research process and improve the skills of the researcher to conduct research. [29]

Conducting observations involves a variety of activities and considerations for the researcher, which include ethics, establishing rapport, selecting key informants, the processes for conducting observations, deciding what and when to observe, keeping field notes, and writing up one's findings. In this section, these aspects of the research activities are discussed in more detail. [30]

8.1 Ethics

A primary consideration in any research study is to conduct the research in an ethical manner, letting the community know that one's purpose for observing is to document their activities. While there may be instances where covert observation methods might be appropriate, these situations are few and are suspect. DeWALT, DeWALT, and WAYLAND (1998) advise the researcher to take some of the field notes publicly to reinforce that what the researcher is doing is collecting data for research purposes. When the researcher meets community members for the first time, he/she should be sure to inform them of the purpose for being there, sharing sufficient information with them about the research topic that their questions about the research and the researcher's presence there are put to rest. This means that one is constantly introducing oneself as a researcher. [31]

Another ethical responsibility is to preserve the anonymity of the participants in the final write-up and in field notes to prevent their identification, should the field notes be subpoenaed for inspection. Individual identities must be described in ways that community members will not be able to identify the participants. Several years ago, when I submitted an article for publication, one of the reviewers provided feedback that it would be helpful to the reader if I described the participants as, for example, "a 35 year old divorced mother of three, who worked at Wal-Mart." This level of detail was not a feasible option for me in providing a description of individual participants, as it would have been easy for the local community members to identify these participants from such specific detail; this was a small community where everyone knew everyone else, and they would have known who the woman was. Instead, I only provided broad descriptions that lacked specific details, such as "a woman in her thirties who worked in the retail industry." [32]

DeWALT, DeWALT, and WAYLAND also point out that there is an ethical concern regarding the relationships established by the researcher when conducting participant observation; the researcher needs to develop close relationships, yet those relationships are difficult to maintain, when the researcher returns to his/her home at a distant location. It is typical for researchers who spend an extended period of time in a community to establish friendships or other relationships, some of which may extend over a lifetime; others are transient and extend only for the duration of the research study. Particularly when conducting cross-cultural research, it is necessary to have an understanding of cultural norms that exist. As MARSHALL and BATTEN (2004) note, one must address issues, such as potential exploitation and inaccuracy of findings, or other actions which may cause damage to the community. They suggest that the researcher take a participatory approach to research by including community members in the research process, beginning with obtaining culturally appropriate permission to conduct research and ensuring that the research addresses issues of importance to the community. They further suggest that the research findings be shared with the community to ensure accuracy of findings. In my own ongoing research projects with the Muscogee (Creek) people, I have maintained relationships with many of the people, including tribal leaders, tribal administrators, and council members, and have shared the findings with selected tribal members to check my findings. Further, I have given them copies of my work for their library. I, too, have found that, by taking a participatory approach to my research with them, I have been asked to participate in studies that they wish to have conducted. [33]

8.2 Gaining entry and establishing rapport

Regarding entering the field, there are several activities that must be addressed. These include choosing a site, gaining permission, selecting key informants, and familiarizing oneself with the setting or culture (BERNARD, 1994). In this process, one must choose a site that will facilitate easy access to the data. The objective is to collect data that will help answer the research questions. [34]

To assist in gaining permission from the community to conduct the study, the researcher may bring letters of introduction or other information that will ease entry, such as information about one's affiliation, funding sources, and planned length of time in the field. One may need to meet with the community leaders. For example, when one wishes to conduct research in a school, permission must be granted by the school principal and, possibly, by the district school superintendent. For research conducted in indigenous communities, it may be necessary to gain permission from the tribal leader or council. [35]

One should use personal contacts to ease entry; these would include key informants who serve as gatekeepers, but BERNARD cautions against choosing a gatekeeper who represents one side of warring factions, as the researcher may be seen as affiliated with that faction. He also cautions that, when using highly placed individuals as gatekeepers, the researcher may be expected to serve as a spy. AGAR (1980) suggests that the researcher be wary of accepting the first people he/she encounters in the research setting as key informants, as they may be "deviants" or "professional stranger handlers." The former may be people who live on the fringe of the culture, and association with them may provide the researcher with erroneous views of the culture or may alienate the researcher from others who might better inform the study. The "professional stranger handlers" are those people who take upon themselves the job of finding out what it is the researcher is after and how it may affect the members of the culture. AGAR suggests finding a key informant to sponsor the researcher to facilitate his/her meeting those people who can provide the needed information. These key informants must be people who are respected by other cultural members and who are viewed to be neutral, to enable the researcher to meet informants in all of the various factions found in the culture. [36]

The researcher also should become familiar with the setting and social organization of the culture. This may involve mapping out the setting or developing social networks to help the researcher understand the situation. These activities also are useful for enabling the researcher to know what to observe and from whom to gather information. [37]

"Hanging out" is the process through which the researcher gains trust and establishes rapport with participants (BERNARD, 1994). DeMUNCK and SOBO (1998) state that, "only through hanging out do a majority of villagers get an opportunity to watch, meet, and get to know you outside your 'professional' role" (p.41). This process of hanging out involves meeting and conversing with people to develop relationships over an extended period of time. There are three stages to the hanging out process, moving from a position of formal, ignorant intruder to welcome, knowledgeable intimate (DeMUNCK & SOBO). The first stage is the stage at which the researcher is a stranger who is learning the social rules and language, making herself/himself known to the community, so they will begin to teach her/him how to behave appropriately in that culture. In the second stage, one begins to merge with the crowd and stand out less as an intruder, what DeMUNCK and SOBO call the "acquaintance" stage. During this stage, the language becomes more familiar to the researcher, but he/she still may not be fluent in its use. The third stage they mention is called the "intimate" stage, during which the researcher has established relationships with cultural participants to the extent that he/she no longer has to think about what he/she says, but is as comfortable with the interaction as the participants are with her/him being there. There is more to participant observation than just hanging out. It sometimes involves the researcher's working with and participating in everyday activities beside participants in their daily lives. It also involves taking field notes of observations and interpretations. Included in this fieldwork is persistent observation and intermittent questioning to gain clarification of meaning of activities. [38]

Rapport is built over time; it involves establishing a trusting relationship with the community, so that the cultural members feel secure in sharing sensitive information with the researcher to the extent that they feel assured that the information gathered and reported will be presented accurately and dependably. Rapport-building involves active listening, showing respect and empathy, being truthful, and showing a commitment to the well-being of the community or individual. Rapport is also related to the issue of reciprocity, the giving back of something in return for their sharing their lives with the researcher. The cultural members are sharing information with the researcher, making him/her welcome in the community, inviting him/her to participate in and report on their activities. The researcher has the responsibility for giving something back, whether it is monetary remuneration, gifts or material goods, physical labor, time, or research results. Confidentiality is also a part of the reciprocal trust established with the community under study. They must be assured that they can share personal information without their identity being exposed to others. [39]

BERNARD states that "the most important thing you can do to stop being a freak is to speak the language of the people you're studying—and speak it well" (1994, p.145). Fluency in the native language helps gain access to sensitive information and increases rapport with participants. Learn about local dialects, he suggests, but refrain from trying to mimic local pronunciations, which may be misinterpreted as ridicule. Learning to speak the language shows that the researcher has a vested interest in the community, that the interest is not transient, and helps the researcher to understand the nuances of conversation, particularly what constitutes humor. [40]

As mentioned in the discussion of the limitations of observation, BERNARD suggests that gender affects one's ability to access certain information and how one views others. What is appropriate action in some cultures is dependent upon one's gender. Gender can limit what one can ask, what one can observe, and what one can report. For example, several years after completing my doctoral dissertation with Muscogee (Creek) women about their perceptions of work, I returned for additional interviews with the women to gather specific information about more intimate aspects of their lives that had been touched on briefly in our previous conversations, but which were not reported. During these interviews, they shared with me their stories about how they learned about intimacy when they were growing up. Because the conversations dealt with sexual content, which, in their culture, was referred to more delicately as intimacy, I was unable to report my findings, as, to do so, would have been inappropriate. One does not discuss such topics in mixed company, so my writing about this subject might have endangered my reputation in the community or possibly inhibited my continued relationship with community members. I was forced to choose between publishing the findings, which would have benefited my academic career, and retaining my reputation within the Creek community. I chose to maintain a relationship with the Creek people, so I did not publish any of the findings from that study. I also was told by the funding source that I should not request additional funds for research, if the results would not be publishable. [41]

8.3 The processes of conducting observations

Exactly how does one go about conducting observation? WERNER and SCHOEPFLE (1987, as cited in ANGROSINO & dePEREZ, 2000) focus on the process of conducting observations and describe three types of processes:

1. The first is *descriptive observation*, in which one observes anything and everything, assuming that he/she knows nothing; the disadvantage of this type is that it can lead to the collection of minutiae that may or may not be relevant to the study.
2. The second type, *focused observation*, emphasizes observation supported by interviews, in which the participants' insights guide the researcher's decisions about what to observe.
3. The third type of observation, considered by ANGROSINO and DePEREZ to be the most systematic, is *selective observation*, in which the researcher focuses on different types of activities to help delineate the differences in those activities (ANGROSINO & dePEREZ, 2000, p.677). [42]

Other researchers have taken a different approach to explaining how to conduct observations. For example, MERRIAM (1988) developed an observation guide in which she compiled various elements to be recorded in field notes. The first of these elements includes the physical environment. This involves observing the surroundings of the setting and providing a written description of the context. Next, she describes the participants in detail. Then she records the activities and interactions that occur in the setting. She also looks at the frequency and duration of those activities/interactions and other subtle factors, such as informal, unplanned activities, symbolic meanings, nonverbal communication, physical clues, and what should happen that has not happened. In her 1998 book, MERRIAM adds such elements as observing the conversation in terms of content, who speaks to whom, who listens, silences, the researcher's own behavior and how that role affects those one is observing, and what one says or thinks. [43]

To conduct participant observation, one must live in the context to facilitate *prolonged engagement*; prolonged engagement is one of the activities listed by LINCOLN and GUBA (1994) to establish trustworthiness. The findings are considered to be more trustworthy, when the researcher can show that he/she spent a considerable amount of time in the setting, as this prolonged interaction with the community enables the researcher to have more opportunities to observe and participate in a variety of activities over time. The reader would not view the findings as credible, if the researcher only spent a week in the culture; however, he/she would be more assured that the findings are accurate, if the researcher lived in the culture for an extended time or visited the culture repeatedly over time. Living in the culture enables one to learn the language and participate in everyday activities. Through these activities, the researcher has access to community members who can explain the meaning that such activities hold for them as individuals and can use conversations to elicit data in lieu of more formal interviews. [44]

When I was preparing to conduct my ethnographic study with the Muscogee (Creek) women of Oklahoma, my professor, Valerie FENNELL, told me that I should take the attitude of "treat me like a little child who knows nothing," so that my informants would teach me what I needed to know about the culture. I found this attitude to be very helpful in establishing rapport, in getting the community members to explain things they thought I should know, and in inviting me to observe activities that they felt were important for my understanding of their culture. DeWALT and DeWALT support the view of the ethnographer as an apprentice, taking the stance of a child in need of teaching about the cultural mores as a means for enculturation. KOTTAK (1994) defines enculturation as "the social process by which culture is learned and transmitted across generations" (p.16). Conducting observations involves such activities as "fitting in, active seeing, short-term memory, informal interviewing, recording detailed field notes, and, perhaps most importantly, patience" (DeWALT & DeWALT, 2002, p.17). DeWALT and DeWALT extend this list of necessary skills, adding MEAD's suggested activities, which include developing tolerance to poor conditions and unpleasant situations, resisting impulsiveness, particularly interrupting others, and resisting attachment to particular factions or individuals. [45]

ANGROSINO and DePEREZ (2000) advocate using a structured observation process to maximize the efficiency of the field experience, minimize researcher bias, and facilitate replication or verification by others, all of which make the findings more objective. This objectivity, they explain, occurs when there is agreement between the researcher and the participants as to what is going on. Sociologists, they note, typically use document analysis to check their results, while anthropologists tend to verify their findings through participant observation. [46]

BERNARD (1994) states that most basic anthropological research is conducted over a period of about a year, but recently there have been participant observations that were conducted in a matter of weeks. In these instances, he notes the use of rapid assessment techniques that include

> "going in and getting on with the job of collection data without spending months developing rapport. This means going into a field situation armed with a lot of questions that you want to answer and perhaps a checklist of data that you need to collect" (p.139). [47]

In this instance the cultural members are taken into the researcher's confidence as research partners to enable him/her to get the questions answered. BERNARD notes that those anthropologists who are in the field for extended periods of time are better able to obtain information of a sensitive nature, such as information about witchcraft, sexuality, political feuds, etc. By staying involved with the culture over a period of years, data about social changes that occur over time are more readily perceived and understood. [48]

BERNARD and his associates developed an outline of the stages of participant observation fieldwork that includes initial contact; shock; discovering the obvious; the break; focusing; exhaustion, the second break, and frantic activity; and leaving. In ethnographic research, it is common for the researcher to live in the culture under study for extended periods of time and to return home for short breaks, then return to the research setting for more data collection. When the researcher encounters a culture that is different from his/her own and lives in that culture, constantly being bombarded by new stimuli, culture shock results. Researchers react differently to such shock. Some may sit in their motel room and play cards or read novels to escape. Others may work and rework data endlessly. Sometimes the researcher needs to take a break from the constant observation and note taking to recuperate. When I conducted my dissertation fieldwork, I stayed in a local motel, although I had been invited to stay at the home of some community members. I chose to remain in the motel, because this enabled me to have the down time in the evenings that I needed to write up field notes and code and analyze data. Had I stayed with friends, they may have felt that they had to entertain me, and I would have felt obligated to spend my evenings conversing or participating in whatever activities they had planned, when I needed some time to myself to be alone, think, and "veg" out. [49]

The aspects of conducting observations are discussed above, but these are not the only ways to conduct observations. DeMUNCK and SOBO use *freelisting* to elicit from cultural members items related to specific categories of information. Through freelisting, they build a dictionary of coded responses to explain various categories. They also suggest the use of pile sorting, which involves the use of cards that participants sort into piles according to similar topics. The process involves making decisions about what topics to include. Such card pile sorting processes are easy to administer and may be meaningful to the participant's world and frames of reference (DeMUNCK & SOBO, 1998). [50]

A different approach to observation, *consensus analysis*, is a method DeMUNCK and SOBO describe to design sampling frames for ethnographic research, enabling the researcher to establish the viewpoints of the participants from the inside out. This involves aspects of ethnographic fieldwork, such as getting to know participants intimately to understand their way of thinking and experiencing the world. It further involves verifying information gathered to determine if the researcher correctly understood the information collected. The question of whether one has understood correctly lends itself to the internal validity question of whether the researcher has correctly understood the participants. Whether the information can be generalized addresses the external validity in terms of whether the interpretation is transferable from the sample to the population from which it was selected. DeMUNCK and SOBO note that the ethnographer begins with a topic and discusses that topic with various people who know about it. He/She selects a variety of people who know about the topic to include in the sample, remembering that not everyone has the same opinion or experience about the topic. They suggest using a nested sampling frame to determine differences in knowledge about a topic. To help determine the differences, the researcher should ask the participants if they know people who have a different experience or opinion of the topic. Seeking out participants with different points of view enables the researcher to fully flesh out understanding of the topic in that culture. DeMUNCK and SOBO also suggest talking with anyone who is willing to teach you. [51]

9. Tips for Collecting Useful Observation Data

TAYLOR and BOGDAN (1984) provided several tips for conducting observations after one has gained entry into the setting under study. They suggest that the researcher should:

- be unobtrusive in dress and actions;
- become familiar with the setting before beginning to collect data;
- keep the observations short at first to keep from becoming overwhelmed;
- be honest, but not too technical or detailed, in explaining to participants what he/she is doing. [52]

MERRIAM (1998) adds that the researcher should:

- pay attention, shifting from a "wide" to a "narrow" angle perspective, focusing on a single person, activity, interaction, then returning to a view of the overall situation;
- look for key words in conversations to trigger later recollection of the conversation content;
- concentrate on the first and last remarks of a conversation, as these are most easily remembered;
- during breaks in the action, mentally replay remarks and scenes one has observed. [53]

DeWALT and DeWALT (2002) make these suggestions:

- Actively observe, attending to details one wants to record later.
- Look at the interactions occurring in the setting, including who talks to whom, whose opinions are respected, how decisions are made. Also observe where participants stand or sit, particularly those with power versus those with less power or men versus women.
- Counting persons or incidents of observed activity is useful in helping one recollect the situation, especially when viewing complex events or events in which there are many participants.
- Listen carefully to conversations, trying to remember as many verbatim conversations, nonverbal expressions, and gestures as possible. To assist in seeing events with "new eyes," turn detailed jottings into extensive field notes, including spatial maps and interaction maps. Look carefully to seek out new insights.
- Keep a running observation record. [54]

WOLCOTT (2001) adds to the discussion of how to conduct observations. He suggests that, to move around gracefully within the culture, one should:

- practice reciprocity in whatever terms are appropriate for that culture;
- be tolerant of ambiguity; this includes being adaptable and flexible;
- have personal determination and faith in oneself to help alleviate culture shock. [55]

He further shares some tips for doing better participant observation (pp.96-100).

- When one is not sure what to attend to, he/she should look to see what it is that he/she is attending to and try to determine how and why one's attention has been drawn as it has. One should take note of what he/she is observing, what is being put into the field notes and in how much detail, and what one is noting about the researcher's personal experience in conducting the research. The process of note taking is not complete until one has reviewed his/her notes to make sure that he/she is coupling the analysis with observations throughout the process to keep the researcher on track.
- The researcher should review constantly what he/she is looking for and whether he/she is seeing it or is likely to do so in the circumstances for observation presented. It may be necessary to refocus one's attention to what is actually going on. This process involves looking for recurring patterns or underlying themes in behavior, action or inaction. He/she should also reflect on what someone from another discipline might find of interest there. He/she should look at her/his participation, what he/she is observing and recording, in terms of the kind of information he/she will need to report rather than what he/she feels he/she should collect.
- Being attentive for any length of time is difficult to do. One tends to do it off and on. One should be aware that his/her attention to details comes in short bursts that are followed by inattentive rests, and those moments of attention should be capitalized upon.
- One should reflect on the note taking process and subsequent writing-up practices as a critical part of fieldwork, making it part of the daily routine, keeping the entries up to date. The elaborated note taking also provides a connection between what he/she is experiencing and how he/she is translating that experience into a form that can be communicated to others. He/she should make a habit of including in one's field notes such specifics as day, date, and time, along with a simple coding system for keeping track of entries, and reflections on and about one's mood, personal reactions, and random thoughts, as these may help to recapture detail not written down. One should also consider beginning to do some writing as fieldwork proceeds. One should take time frequently to draft expanded pieces written using "thick description," as described by GEERTZ (1973), so that such details might later be incorporated into the final write up.
- One should take seriously the challenge of participating and focus, when appropriate, on one's role as participant over one's role as observer. Fieldwork involves more than data gathering. It may also involve informal interviews, conversations, or more structured interviews, such as questionnaires or surveys. [56]

BERNARD notes that one must become explicitly aware, being attentive in his/her observations, reporting what is seen, not inferred. It is natural to impose on a situation what is culturally correct, in the absence of real memories, but building memory capacity can be enhanced by practicing reliable observation. If the data one collects is not reliable, the conclusions will not be valid. BERNARD advises that the researcher not talk to anyone after observing, until he/she has written down his/her field notes. He advocates that he/she try to remember things in historical/chronological order and draw a map of the physical space to help him/her remember details. He also suggests that the researcher maintain naiveté, assuming an attitude of learner and being guided by participants' teaching without being considered stupid, incompetent, or dangerous to their wellbeing. Sometimes, he points out, one's expertise is what helps to establish rapport. Having good writing skills, that is, writing concisely and compellingly, is also necessary to good participant observation. The researcher must learn to 'hang out' to enable him/her to ask questions when appropriate and to ask appropriate questions. Maintaining one's objectivity means realizing and acknowledging one's biases, assumptions, prejudices, opinions, and values. [57]

10. Keeping and Analyzing Field Notes and Writing up the Findings

KUTSCHE (1998) suggests that, when mapping out a setting, one must first learn to put aside his/her preconceptions. The process of mapping, as he describes it, involves describing the relationship between the sociocultural behavior one observes and the physical environment. The researcher should draw a physical map of the setting, using as much detail as possible. KUTSCHE suggests that the researcher visit the setting under study at different times of the day to see how it is used differently at different times of the day/night. He/she should describe without judgment and avoid using meaningless adjectives, such as "older" (older than what/whom?) or "pretty" (as compared to what/whom?); use adjectives that help to describe the various aspects of the setting meaningfully (what is it that makes the house inviting?). When one succeeds in avoiding judgment, he/she is practicing cultural relativism. This mapping process uses only one of the five senses—vision. "Human events happen in particular places, weathers, times, and so forth. If you are intrigued, you will be pleased to know that what you are doing is a subdiscipline of anthropology called cultural ecology" (p.16). It involves looking at the interaction of the participants with the environment. STEWARD (1955, as cited in KUTSCHE, 1998), a student of KROEBER (1939, as cited in KUTSCHE, 1998), who wrote about Native American adaptations to North American environments, developed a theory called "multilinear evolution" in which he described how cultural traditions evolve related to specific environments.

> "Cultural systems are not just rules for behavior, ways of surviving, or straitjackets to constrict free expression ... All cultures, no matter how simple or sophisticated, are also rhythms, music, architecture, the dances of living. ... To look at culture as style is to look at ritual" (p.49). [58]

KUTSCHE refers to ritual as being the symbolic representation of the sentiments in a situation, where the situation involves person, place, time, conception, thing, or occasion. Some of the examples of cultural rituals KUTSCHE presents for analysis include rites of deference or rites of passage. Ritual and habit are different, KUTSCHE explains, in that habits have no symbolic expression or meaning (such as tying one's shoes in the same way each time). [59]

In mapping out the setting being observed, SCHENSUL, SCHENSUL, and LeCOMPTE (1999) suggest the following be included:

- a count of attendees, including such demographics as age, gender, and race;
- a physical map of the setting and description of the physical surroundings;
- a portrayal of where participants are positioned over time;
- a description of the activities being observed, detailing activities of interest. [60]

They indicate that counting, census taking, and mapping are important ways to help the researcher gain a better understanding of the social setting in the early stages of participation, particularly when the researcher is not fluent in the language and has few key informants in the community. [61]

Social differences they mention that are readily observed include differences among individuals, families, or groups by educational level, type of employment, and income. Things to look for include the cultural members' manner of dress and decorative accoutrements, leisure activities, speech patterns, place of residence and choice of transportation. They also add that one might look for differences in housing structure or payment structure for goods or services. [62]

Field notes are the primary way of capturing the data that is collected from participant observations. Notes taken to capture this data include records of what is observed, including informal conversations with participants, records of activities and ceremonies, during which the researcher is unable to question participants about their activities, and journal notes that are kept on a daily basis. DeWALT, DeWALT, and WAYLAND describe field notes as both data and analysis, as the notes provide an accurate description of what is observed and are the product of the observation process. As they note, observations are not data unless they are recorded into field notes. [63]

DeMUNCK and SOBO (1998) advocate using two notebooks for keeping field notes, one with questions to be answered, the other with more personal observations that may not fit the topics covered in the first notebook. They do this to alleviate the clutter of extraneous information that can occur when taking. Field notes in the first notebook should include jottings, maps, diagrams, interview notes, and observations. In the second notebook, they suggest keeping memos, casual "mullings, questions, comments, quirky notes, and diary type entries" (p.45). One can find information in the notes easily by indexing and cross-referencing information from both notebooks by noting on index cards such information as "conflicts, gender, jokes, religion, marriage, kinship, men's activities, women's activities, and so on" (p.45). They summarize each day's notes and index them by notebook, page number, and a short identifying description. [64]

The feelings, thoughts, suppositions of the researcher may be noted separately. SCHENSUL, SCHENSUL, and LeCOMPTE (1999) note that good field notes:

- use exact quotes when possible;
- use pseudonyms to protect confidentiality;
- describe activities in the order in which they occur;
- provide descriptions without inferring meaning;
- include relevant background information to situate the event;
- separate one's own thoughts and assumptions from what one actually observes;
- record the date, time, place, and name of researcher on each set of notes. [65]

Regarding coding their observation notes, DeMUNCK and SOBO (1998) suggest that coding is used to select and emphasize information that is important enough to record, enabling the researcher to weed out extraneous information and focus his/her observations on the type of information needed for the study. They describe codes as

> "rules for organizing symbols into larger and more meaningful strings of symbols. It is important, no imperative, to construct a coding system not because the coding system represents the 'true' structure of the process you are studying, but because it offers a framework for organizing and thinking about the data" (p.48). [66]

KUTSCHE states that, when one is trying to analyze interview information and observation field notes, he/she is trying to develop a model that helps to make sense of what the participants do. One is constructing a model of culture, not telling *the* truth about the data, as there are numerous truths, particularly when presented from each individual participant's viewpoint. The researcher should set out an outline of the information he/she has, organize the information according to the outline, then move the points around as the argument of one's study dictates. He further suggests that he/she organize the collected data into a narrative in which one may tell the story of a day or a week in the lives of informants, as they may have provided information in these terms in response to grand tour questions, that is, questions that encourage participants to elaborate on their description of a cultural scene (SPRADLEY, 1979). Once the data have been organized in this way, there will probably be several sections in the narrative that reflect one's interpretation of certain themes that make the cultural scene clear to the reader. He further suggests asking participants to help structure the report. In this way, member checks and peer debriefing occur to help ensure the trustworthiness of the data (LINCOLN & GUBA, 1994). [67]

When writing up one's description of a ritual, KUTSCHE advises the researcher to make a short draft of the ritual and then take specific aspects to focus on and write up in detail with one's analysis. It is the analysis that differentiates between creative writing and ethnology, he points out. When writing up one's ethnographic observations, KUTSCHE advises that the researcher follow the lead of SPRADLEY and McCURDY (1972) and find a cultural scene, spend time with the informants, asking questions and clarifying answers, analyze the material, pulling together the themes into a well-organized story. Regarding developing models, he indicates that the aim is to construct a picture of the culture that reflects the data one has collected. He bases his model development on guidelines by Ward H. GOODENOUGH, who advocates that the first level of development includes what happens, followed by a second level of development which includes what the ethnographer has observed, subsequently followed by a third level including what was recorded in the field, and finally followed by a fourth level derived from one's notes. He adds that GOODENOUGH describes a fifth level, in which ethnological theory is developed from separate models of separate cultures. KUTSCHE defines models as having four properties described by LEVI-STRAUSS (1953, p.525, as cited in KUTSCHE,1998), two of which are pertinent to this discussion: the first property, in which the structure exhibits the characteristics of a system, and the fourth property, in which the model makes clear all observed facts. [68]

WOLCOTT indicates that fieldworkers of today should put themselves into their written discussion of the analysis without regaling the reader with self-reports of how well they did their job. This means that there will be a bit of postmodern auto-ethnographic information told in the etic or researcher's voice (PIKE, 1966), along with the participants' voices which provide the emic perspective (PIKE, 1966). Autoethnography, in recent years, has become an accepted means for illustrating the knowledge production of researchers from their own perspective, incorporating their own feelings and emotions into the mix, as is illustrated by Carolyn ELLIS (i.e., ELLIS, 2003, and HOLMAN JONES, 2004). [69]

11. Teaching Participant Observation

Throughout the past eight or so years of teaching qualitative research courses, I have developed a variety of exercises for teaching observation skills, based on techniques I observed from other researchers and teachers of qualitative research or techniques described in others' syllabi. Over time, I have revised others' exercises and created my own to address the needs of my students in learning how to conduct qualitative research. Below are several of those exercises that other professors of qualitative research methods may find useful. [70]

Memory Exercise—Students are asked to think of a familiar place, such as a room in their home, and make field notes that include a map of the setting and a physical description of as much as they can remember of what is contained in that setting. They are then asked to compare their recollections with the actual setting to see what they were able to remember and how well they were able to do so. The purpose of this exercise is to help students realize how easy it is to overlook various aspects that they have not consciously tried to remember. In this way, they begin to be attentive to details and begin to practice active observing skills. [71]

Sight without sound—In this exercise, students are asked to find a setting in which they are able to see activity but in which they are unable to hear what is being said in the interaction. For a specified length of time (5 to 10 minutes), they are to observe the action/interaction, and record as much information as they can in as much detail as possible. This exercise has also been done by turning off the sound on the television and observing the actions/interactions on a program; students, in this case, are instructed to find a television program with which they are unfamiliar, so they are less apt to impose upon their field notes what they believe they know about familiar characters or programs. This option is less desirable, as students sometimes find it difficult to find a program with which they do not have some familiarity. The purpose of the exercise is to teach the students to begin observing and taking in information using their sight. [72]

Instructions for writing up their field notes include having them begin by drawing a map of the setting and providing a description of the participants. By having them record on one side of their paper what information they take in through their senses and on the other side whatever thoughts, feelings, ideas they have about what is happening, they are more likely to begin to see the difference in observed data and their own construction or interpretation of the activity. This exercise also helps them realize the importance of using all of their senses to take in information and the importance of observing both the verbal and the nonverbal behaviors of the situation. Possible settings for observation in this exercise have included sitting inside fast-food restaurants, viewing the playground, observing interactions across parking lots or mall food courts, or viewing interactions at a distance on the subway, for example. [73]

Sound without sight—In this exercise, similar to the above exercise, students are asked to find a setting in which they are able to hear activity/interactions, but in which they are unable to see what is going on. Again, for a specified length of time, they are asked to record as much as they can hear of the interaction, putting their thoughts, feelings, and ideas about what is happening on the right side of the paper, and putting the information they take in with their senses on the left hand side of the paper. Before beginning, they again are asked to describe the setting, but, if possible, they are not to see the participants in the setting under study. In this way, they are better able to note their guesses about the participants' ages, gender, ethnicity, etc. My students have conducted this exercise in restaurants, listening to conversations of patrons in booths behind them, while sitting on airplanes or other modes of transportation, or by sitting outside classrooms where students were interacting, for example. A variation of this exercise is to have students turn their backs to the television or listen to a radio program with which they are unfamiliar, and have them conduct the exercise in that fashion, without sight to guide their interpretations. [74]

In both of these examples, male students are cautioned to stay away from playgrounds or other settings where there actions may be misconstrued. They are further cautioned against sitting in vehicles and observing, as several of my students have been approached by security or police officers who questioned them about their actions. The lesson here is that, while much information can be taken in through hearing conversations, without the body language, meanings can be misconstrued. Further, they usually find it interesting to make guesses about the participants in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and relationship to other participants in the setting, based on what they heard. [75]

In both of these examples, it is especially interesting when one student conducts the sight without sound and another students conducts the sound without sight exercise using the same interaction/setting, as their explanations, when shared in class, sometimes illustrate how easy it is to put one's own construction on what is actually happening. [76]

Photographic Observation—This exercise encourages students to use photographs to help them remember activities, and photographs can serve as illustrations of aspects of activities that are not easily described. Students are asked to take a series of 12 to 36 photographs of an activity, and provide a written description of the activity that tells the story of what is happening in the activity, photo by photo. They are instructed to number the photographs and take notes as they take pictures to help them keep the photos organized in the right sequence. Several students have indicated that this was a fun exercise in which their children, who were the participants in the activity, were delighted to be involved; they also noted that this provided them with a pictographic recollection of a part of their children's lives that would be a keepsake. One student recorded her 6 year old daughter's first formal tea party, for example. [77]

Direct Observation—In this instance, students are asked to find a setting they wish to observe in which they will be able to observe without interruption and in which they will not be participating. For some specified length of time (about 15 to 30 minutes), they are asked to record everything they can take in through their senses about that setting and the interactions contained therein for the duration of the time period, again recording on one side of the paper their field notes from observation and on the other side their thoughts, feelings, and ideas about what is happening. Part of the lesson here is that, when researchers are recording aspects of the observation, whether it be the physical characteristics of the setting or interactions between participants, they are unable to both observe and record. This exercise is also good practice for getting them to write detailed notes about what is or is not happening, about the physical surroundings, and about interactions, particularly conversations and the nonverbal behaviors that go along with those conversations. [78]

Participant Observation—Students are asked to participate in some activity that takes at least 2 hours, during which they are not allowed to take any notes. Having a few friends or family members over for dinner is a good example of a situation where they must participate without taking notes. In this situation, the students must periodically review what they want to remember. They are instructed to remember as much as possible, then record their recollections in as much detail as they can remember as soon as possible after the activity ends. Students are cautioned not to talk to anyone or drink too much, so their recollections will be unaltered. The lesson here is that they must consciously try to remember bits of conversation and other details in chronological order. [79]

When comparing their field notes from direct observation to participant observation, the students may find that their notes from direct observation (without participation) are more detailed and lengthy than with participant observation; however, through participation, there is more involvement in the activities under study, so there is likely to be better interpretation of what happened and why. They also may find that participant observation lends itself better to recollecting information at a later time than direct observation. [80]

12. Summary

Participant observation involves the researcher's involvement in a variety of activities over an extended period of time that enable him/her to observe the cultural members in their daily lives and to participate in their activities to facilitate a better understanding of those behaviors and activities. The process of conducting this type of field work involves gaining entry into the community, selecting gatekeepers and key informants, participating in as many different activities as are allowable by the community members, clarifying one's findings through member checks, formal interviews, and informal conversations, and keeping organized, structured field notes to facilitate the development of a narrative that explains various cultural aspects to the reader. Participant observation is used as a mainstay in field work in a variety of disciplines, and, as such, has proven to be a beneficial tool for producing studies that provide accurate representation of a culture. This paper, while not wholly inclusive of all that has been written about this type of field work methods, presents an overview of what is known about it, including its various definitions, history, and purposes, the stances of the researcher, and information about how to conduct observations in the field. [81]

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