

Encyclopedia of Case Study Research

Nonparticipant Observation

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Nonparticipant observation is a data collection method used extensively in case study research in which the researcher enters a social system to observe events, activities, and interactions with the aim of gaining a direct understanding of a phenomenon in its natural context. As a nonparticipant, the observer does not participate directly in the activities being observed.

Concept Overview and Discussion

Nonparticipant observation has a long history in the social and behavioral sciences. It is distinguished from participant observation by the observer's level and kind of involvement in the research setting, the nonparticipant observer adopting a more distant [p. 610 ↓] and separate role. At its most extreme, the nonparticipant observer has no contact whatsoever with the researched, but watches and records events through one-way mirrors or with cameras.

Nonparticipant observation may be overt or covert. When overt, participants understand that the observer is there for research purposes: The observer is present during organizational activities and has a role clearly distinct from that of organizational members. When observation is covert—either by hidden cameras or by an observer pretending not to be studying the setting—participants are unaware that they are being studied.

Because observation involves physically entering into the world of the researched, spending much time around them, and often being privy to quite sensitive issues, a critical first step is building trust and developing empathy with participants. This is especially important for those who at first might be wary of being researched. Developing strong relationships with participants not only increases the level of access that can be attained, but also deepens the insights gained into their world. At the same time, it holds the danger of the observer “going native,” which happens when he or she overidentifies with those he or she studies.

The observation process is a three-stage funnel, according to James Spradley, beginning with *descriptive observation*, in which researchers carry out broad scope

observation to get an overview of the setting, moving to *focused observation*, in which they start to pay attention to a narrower portion of the activities that most interest them, and then *selected observation*, in which they investigate relations among the elements they have selected as being of greatest interest. Observation should end when theoretical saturation is reached, which occurs when further observations begin to add little or nothing to researchers' understanding. This usually takes a period of days or months, but, depending on the phenomenon in question, sometimes several years.

Key to good nonparticipant observation is the taking of detailed field notes to record what has been observed. Researchers may also use audio or video recorders or cameras to capture activities in the setting, technologies that, as they become smaller and less expensive, are becoming more common in case study research. This way of capturing the raw data can be of great value, not only securing incidents or exchanges that might have been missed or forgotten, but also allowing the researcher and others to revisit a faithful record of the data long after the field work is finished.

Application

While rarely used alone as a data collection technique, nonparticipant observation is often combined with other methods, such as interviews, document analysis, and surveys. As such, it has been an important part of several classic case studies. For example, in his study of how technologies change organizational and occupational structures, Stephen Barley spent one year as a nonparticipant observer in the radiology departments of two hospitals, observing the daily routines of radiologists and technologists. This allowed him to gain an intimate understanding of their actions and their underlying meanings that would have been hard to grasp without having an ongoing presence in the settings. Similarly, Karen Jehn used nonparticipant observation in her multiple case study of group conflict. By observing group members' behavioral reactions at different times throughout the workday, she was able to identify two different types of conflict, as well as evidence of a dynamic shift that occurred between them. Not only did nonparticipant observation allow her to study, in depth, a sensitive phenomenon that participants might have been reluctant to talk about in interviews, but it also provided a nuanced and dynamic appreciation of group conflict that would have been very difficult to identify through survey or other more distant methods.

Critical Summary

Nonparticipant observation has several strengths. First, it provides unique, contextualized insights into events and activities and the meanings that they hold for members of the setting. Second, it enables the researcher to capture the dynamics of participants' interactions with each another and with their work environment, and to do so over time, observing processes as they unfold. Third, it provides a different kind and quality of data than those gathered through self-report methods, such as surveys or interviews. Indeed, it may offer the only viable way to collect data on especially sensitive topics.

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At the same time, nonparticipant observation raises several challenges. One is the observer effect, with its danger of causing reactivity in those under study. Although this effect usually diminishes over time during the observation period, it remains an inherent risk. Second is a concern about the observer's ability to be objective, and to produce an analysis of the setting that is not dominated by his or her values and interpretations. While, as in any study, researcher values and beliefs are an inherent part of the research process, observers can increase the trustworthiness of their data through the use of rigorous and systematic approaches to sampling, field notes, and data analysis. Third is the problem of selectivity: An observation can never be truly complete in the events, activities, people, or interactions studied, or in the time period covered. To address this issue, researchers observe the phenomenon in as wide a range of circumstances as possible, and spend a long time in the field. Fourth are ethical concerns about the greater authority accorded to the researcher's voice than to those of participants in describing and explaining what is going on in the setting. In recognition of this, researchers increasingly draw on both insider (participant) and outsider (researcher) accounts to develop a collaborative portrait of the phenomenon under study.

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See also

Further Readings

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