

The A-Z of Social Research

Observation, overt and covert

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Observation is a fundamental part of social life and is critical to many forms of social interaction and work. Thus, it is necessary to distinguish between observation done to accomplish everyday life and work and that done to understand them. Here again, observation is an inherent part of many types of research; it forms part of laboratory experiments as mice are observed in mazes or chemicals in test tubes. In social research there are two parameters along which observation can be categorised as a research tool. The more familiar typology is based on the degree of participation by the researcher in what is being studied; the other is structured around the level of awareness subjects have of being observed. In the first case the normal contrast is between unobtrusive and participant observation, in the latter, covert and overt observation, and the two sets of distinctions are related.

In participant observation observers participate in the everyday life they are trying to understand. This contrasts with observation where the researcher stands aloof, a form of observation that is part of unobtrusive research, where the intention is to engage in research unknown to subjects in order to avoid the reactive effect. Unobtrusive observation is mostly covert, where subjects do not know they are being observed or are part of a researcher project. But this is not always the case. Unobtrusive observation plays a great part in psychology, where the observation is managed by means of a two-way mirror, and subjects are put in experimental situations where, although the observer does not participate, the observation can be overt in that people may know they are involved in research. Unobtrusive observation therefore does not always eliminate the reactive effect. However, with sociology's focus on naturally occurring behaviour, where subjects tend not to be placed in experimental situations, unobtrusive observation tends to be mostly covert. Nonetheless, it provides a very limited form of data. With participant observation data obtained as a result of watching the phenomenon under study is augmented by data generated through introspection on the part of the researcher. That is, by the observer reflecting on the internal experiences arising from doing and sharing the same everyday life as those under study, a process sometimes also called 'auto-observation'. In this way, data collected by participant observation are not external stimuli unaffected by the intervention of the observer: the experiences, attitude changes and feelings of the observer form a central part of his or her understanding. Unobtrusive observation avoids this reactive effect but at the

cost of reliance on very limited forms of data – that which is garnered by watching. Thus in social research unobtrusive observation either requires no attention to be given to the social meanings involved in the [p. 214 ↓] phenomenon, and thus to the study of fairly unambiguous phenomena, or observation of phenomena known to the researcher where these taken-for-granted social meanings already shape their understanding. Unobtrusive observation, for example, would be impossible in social anthropological research of new and different cultures and people groups; which is why classic social anthropology was one of the intellectual pillars of participant observation. Overt unobtrusive observation is popular in psychology where the actual behaviour is the focus – such as what toys children use in playrooms – rather than the social meanings of the behaviour to the participants. There are occasions in sociology when unambiguous behaviour needs to be studied and for which covert unobtrusive observation is suitable, such as study of pedestrian behaviour, the social formation of queues, and even, as in one study by Stone, the behaviour of men outside pornographic bookstores. Most of these topics, however, involve phenomena whose social meaning can be understood as a result of familiarity. Where this familiarity is lacking, or where the researcher does not want to rely on taken-for-granted knowledge, participant observation comes into its own.

Participant observation can also be done either overtly or covertly. In classic anthropological studies with ‘foreign’ and ‘exotic’ people groups and cultures, where the researcher was white and the subjects not, overt observation was the norm. Among other things, the use of translators where researchers did not know the local language perforce required that subjects know they were being researched. As anthropology has moved into analysing modern and industrialised settings in which researchers can ‘pass’ as ordinary members, it has been possible to engage in covert research. Not all participant observation is covert but a lot has been, particularly when the focus has been on sensitive groups, settings and behaviour in which a pronounced reactive effect is anticipated. Overt participant observation is essential in situations where it is impossible to ‘pass’ as an ordinary member, and when specialised forms of behaviour are required, particularly in occupational settings, such as when studying police forces. This is why work-based ethnography has been done covertly mostly in settings where the occupational tasks are menial and low skilled. Specialised occupational tasks have tended to require members themselves to undertake observation, overtly or covertly,

such as Holdaway's ethnography of policing done while as a serving member of the police (1983), or researchers coming into do overt research (Brewer, 1991) and having to remain distant as a result. One American sociologist decided to enlist in the air force to undertake participant observation in a highly specialised occupational setting rather than come in overtly as an outsider, although this degree of dedication and time commitment is rarely possible.

The participant-unobtrusive dichotomy is not as sharp as the contrast suggests. Often non-participative forms of observation involve the observer in some manipulation or construction of the setting, such as the arrangement of furniture or the positioning of artifacts, and in experimental situations the observer intrudes without participating in the activity. It is thus sometimes necessary to distinguish between level of participation and level of control, for some forms of non-participative observation still involve high degrees of intervention to standardise and manipulate the observation. Likewise, the presence of the participant observer may be unknown or unseen by subjects in some instances and contexts as they are [p. 215 ↓] caught unawares. The level of participation in forms of observation is best perceived as a continuum, around the middle of which there is much blurring and overlap. The same is true for the overt-covert distinction. Overt participant observation requires the permission of the gatekeeper but not everyone in the setting may know of the research or be aware that at that time they are being observed. Some forms of covert research often involve the complicity of one or more members of the field in order to manage the fieldwork and maintain the pretence. Sometimes participant observers let some groups know of the research and others not, by design (to test the impact of their presence) or by accident (in that the pretence can be discovered by some), although this creates difficult relations in the field and can be problematic to maintain. The level of knowledge subjects have of the observation again should be understood as a continuum with blurring in the middle.

It is possible nonetheless to list the respective advantages and disadvantages of overt and covert observation in ideal type terms. Overt observation, for example, assists in researchers maintaining their objectivity precisely because of the detachment and distance involved as a result of subjects knowing they are being studied. It prevents the problem of 'going native', of over-identification with the subjects, that can arise when the researcher has almost to become an 'insider' in order to pass as an ordinary member to avoid disclosure of the observation. Access to some settings, people or groups

may have to be negotiated with a gatekeeper because of the impossibility of entry in some disguised role, and some may even find a special status in being the object of research and grant permission because of it. If members know of the observation, they can assist the observer by treating him or her as an incompetent, a non-initiate, and thus better explain things. Members are often assumed to share the same tacit knowledge and thus outsiders can have things made explicit that members are thought to know already. There can be advantages in overt observation because the people or groups in the setting perceive the researcher as neutral, as above members' conflicts and partisanship, and this can facilitate access to decision-making processes within the field. Above all, overt observation permits use of other data collection techniques alongside observation; interviews can be conducted, questionnaires sent out and natural conversations openly recorded, all things impossible if the research is disguised. However, the gatekeeper or subjects in the field can impose constraints when the observation is overt, the researcher becomes an intervening variable in the field, influencing what is observed, and the data becomes distorted by an unknown 'reactive effect' which can restrict the ability of the researcher to get close to the people and capture life from an insider's point of view.

In reverse mirror image, with covert observation, closeness with the group and immersion in the setting can be more easily generated (although still not guaranteed) because it avoids the distance created by knowledge of the research. It avoids the problem of having to get permission, and it removes the possibility of constraints being imposed by subjects in the field. Nonetheless, special personal skills are needed to take on a disguised role and researchers can become so self-conscious about not revealing their identity that their observation is seriously handicapped. The covertness may or may not involve the researcher pretending to be a full member of the group or setting, in that some other role may be utilised [p. 216 ↓] from which to observe rather than ordinary member. But if the role involves passing as a full member of the group or setting, there is the problem of over-identification – 'going native' – and associated problems arising from lack of detachment. Moreover, there is the problem of collecting data from the role as ordinary member. Covert observation requires the researcher to appear typical and since ordinary members may not ask probing questions, make notes or utilise data collection techniques, the research either risks disclosure or is severely restricted.

Above all, covert observation raises serious ethical concerns since it involves people being deceived and fails to obtain their informed consent. Not only does this breach the dignity of the subjects, it risks harm to the researcher and the discipline as a whole should deceit be shown to be involved. This can make withdrawal from the field very difficult for the covert observer once people become aware of the deception and it cuts off future opportunities for research by someone else. For this reason, covert observation is not encouraged; codes of conduct from ethical committees or professional associations either disallow or discourage it. While much of the ethical debate has focused on covert observation, it is important to note that other methods also breach the principle of informed consent and even where permission is obtained for observational research, this often involves someone else higher up the hierarchy giving permission on a person's behalf lower down. Sometimes however, it can be the only method if the group or setting is closed or hostile to research, although suspicion often surrounds this defence since covert observation can be too readily resorted to.

These distinctions between types of observation belong to realism as an approach to social research since they represent alternative ideas for improving the correspondence between social reality 'as it is' and the observer's representation of it. Post-structuralist and postmodern notions of research dispute that there is unadulterated 'objective' reality anyway to be affected by whether the observation involves participation or not or whether subjects know of the research or not. All research is contaminated and socially situated by the people involved and the methods used, amongst other things. Such an approach tends to make irrelevant most of the tortured judgements around what type of observation to use.

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See also

Suggested further reading

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