

# Participant Observation

Department of Government  
London School of Economics and Political Science

- 1 Interviewing, Continued

- 2 Participant Observation

- 3 Preview

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## Evaluating a questionnaire

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- Is a “no opinion,” “don’t know,” or “neither support nor oppose” response option available?
- Is one survey item (i.e., one question) sufficient to measure this construct?
- How long does it take to read and answer this question?

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- Definitions (in which respondents provide definitions for the key terms in the question)
- Probes (in which respondents answer follow-up questions designed to reveal their response strategies)

# Problem Set 5

- Any questions about Problem Set 5?

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# Focus Groups

- Definition: “A discussion among a small number of members of a target population, guided by a moderator.”<sup>1</sup>
- A bridge between interviewing and ethnography
  - Less structured than an interview
  - Typically brief (1-2 hours)
  - Gather mostly *qualitative* data

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<sup>1</sup>Groves et al. 2009. *Survey Methodology*. 2nd Edition. Wiley.



# “Field work”

- Any research activity outside the university setting
  - Textual or archival searches
  - Interviews (structured or unstructured)
  - Focus groups
  - Participant observation
  - Some mix of these
- Term is agnostic about approach, theory, and method
- Might be one-off, sporadic, or long-term

# Participant Observation

- Definition: “Participant observation is a research strategy whereby the researcher becomes involved in a social situation for the purpose of understanding the behaviour of those engaged in the setting. . . The outcome of the research is a detailed account of the activities and behaviour of those involved.”<sup>2</sup>

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- Generally inductive in nature

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# Assorted Examples

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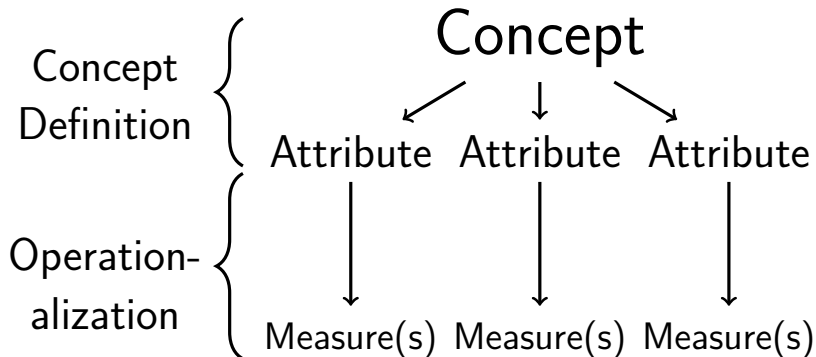
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- 5 Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter. 1956. *When Prophecy Fails*. Harper.

# Operationalization



# Measurement

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- What kind of observations do these authors make?
- What is their unit of analysis?
- Does participant observation generate DSOs or CPOs?

# Four Ideal Types<sup>3</sup>

- 1 Complete participant
- 2 Participant as observer
- 3 Observer as participant
- 4 Complete observer

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<sup>3</sup>Gold, R. 1958. "Roles in Sociological Field Observation." *Social Forces* 36(3): 217–23.

# Complete participant

- Participate without disclosing observer/researcher role
- Essentially covert (“being undercover”)
- May be useful in sensitive domains
- Raises ethical concerns



# Participant as observer

- Participate, but not fully
- Retain explicit observer role
- Negotiate exact role in the situation and access to group members and information

# Observer as participant

- Essentially interviews
- Limited time frames
- Note: Sometimes seen as indistinguishable from “complete observer”

# Complete observer

- Purely observer role; no participation
- Still requires negotiated access in many cases, but may not require the same types of consent as participant roles
- Easier to keep a distance and avoid “rapport” with group members

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- How does being a participant change your interpretations of events?
- How does being an observer change your interpretation of events?



# **Ethnography vs. Journalism**

What's the difference?

# Activity!

- Choose one of the following contexts:
  - Observe Corbyn's shadow cabinet meetings
  - Observe the core leadership of Britain First
- Consider:
  - What is your research question?
  - What kinds of observations do you make?
  - What constraints are placed on what you can do, say, observe, and record?
  - What perspectives/biases do you bring to the situation?
  - Are you a participant, observer, or both?

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# Schedule: Lent Term

- 11 Interviewing, Structured and Unstructured (Jan. 12)
- 12 Participant Observation (Jan. 19)
- 13 Tabulation and Visualization (Jan. 26)
- 14 Sampling and Representativeness (Feb. 2)
- 15 Statistical Inference (Feb. 9)
- 16 Regression Analysis (Feb. 23)
- 17 Matching and Regression (Mar. 1)
- 18 Experimental Design and Quasi-Experiments (Mar. 8)
- 19 Ethics and Research Integrity (Mar. 15)
- 20 Conclusion and Synthesis (Mar. 22)

# LT Reading Week

- No lecture or class
- Opportunity for individual revision
- Structured revision assignment:
  - Develop a study guide for the exam
  - Peer feedback on Moodle:  
<https://moodle.lse.ac.uk/mod/workshop/view.php?id=509034>

# Software

- We will use R
- Download from:  
`https://cran.r-project.org/`
- Helpful to bring your laptop to lecture

