

What is participant observation?

Participant observation is a qualitative research methodology in which the researcher studies a group not only through observation, but also by participating in its activities.

In this qualitative observation methodology, the researcher immerses himself in the daily activities of the participants in order to record the behavior in as many scenarios as possible.

Importance of Participant Observation

1. Participant observation is a method that helps you see and understand what people are doing and compare it with what they say.
2. It helps researchers know if the people with whom you are conducting a study act differently from what they are described.
3. It also allows the researcher to better understand what is happening in a given group and its cultural environment. It gives greater credibility to their interpretations of the observation.
4. It allows the researcher to collect qualitative data through various types of interviews and quantitative data through surveys and different quantitative observation techniques.

Types of Participant Observation

1. Passive Participant Observation

Researchers observe and record the behaviors of their subjects in their own environment without conversing or interacting with them in any way.

Many of the studies that use this form of participant observation are studies in which researchers observe people's behavior and communications in public places, such as restaurants, coffee shops, transportation hubs, and even on the Internet through innovative methods such as *netnography*.

2. Active Participant Observation

In this way, researchers converse with their subjects and participate in the daily life of the groups they study, including their activities, customs, rituals, routines, etc.

The degree of commitment of researchers to these groups varies. Some researchers limit their interactions to interviews, while others engage in all aspects of their subjects' lives.

Examples of this form of participant observation are studies in which researchers lived for long periods of time among different ethnic, cultural, or religious communities.

3. Covert and overt



In covert participant observation, researchers do not make their presence or identity known to their subjects and, if they do, they do not identify themselves as investigators, whereas in open participant observation they make their presence or identity known to their subjects.

However, even when the investigation is open, investigators often do not inform the people that they are here for specific purpose of the investigation, nor do they inform everyone that they are researchers, as this could interrupt conversations and events being observed.

4. Covert and active

Covert and active participant observation has several advantages. In this type of participant observation, researchers can have access to a group that they would not otherwise have the opportunity to observe, and they can experience the practices of the group as they are experienced by the members of the group.

Generally, researchers can alter group behavior by their presence, but in this form of participant observation, groups would not consciously change their behavior in response to the researcher's presence because they are not aware of being observed.

5. Covert and passive

In the case of covert and passive participant observation, researchers are not likely to alter the behaviors of their subjects, since the researchers do not actively engage with their subjects and because the subjects are also not aware that they are being observed.

However, since observation is passive, researchers do not have the opportunity to experience the lives of their subjects for themselves.

6. Open and active

If observation is open and active, people can participate and experience their subjects' activities, but they run the risk of both changing the behavior of their subjects through their interactions with them, and that their subjects can change their behavior by themselves knowing that they are being studied.

7. Open and passive

In this case the presence or the identity of the researcher is known, but he does not participate or indulge in conversation or interaction with the people.

When to use Participant Observation

Participant observation is a type of observational study. Like most observational studies, these are primarily qualitative in nature, used to conduct both explanatory research and exploratory research. Participant observation is also often used along with other types of research, like interviews and surveys.

This type of study is especially well suited for studying social phenomena that are difficult to observe



or measure through other methods. As the researchers observe, they typically take detailed notes about their observations and interactions with the group. These are analyzed to identify patterns and themes using thematic analysis or a similar method.

A participant observation could be a good fit for your research if:

1. **You are studying subcultures or groups with unique practices or beliefs.** Participant observation fosters a deep and intimate understanding of the beliefs, values, and practices of your group or subculture of interest from an insider's perspective. This can be especially useful when studying marginalized groups or groups that are resistant to observation.
2. **You are studying complex social interactions.** Participant observation can be a powerful tool for studying the complex social interactions that occur within a particular group or community. By immersing yourself in the group and observing these interactions firsthand, you can gain a much more nuanced understanding of how these interactions flow.
3. **You are studying behaviors or practices that may be difficult to self-report.** In some cases, participants may be unwilling or unable to accurately report their own behaviors or practices. Participant observation allows researchers to observe these behaviors directly, allowing for more accuracy in the data collection phase.

Characteristics of participant observation

It has the following characteristics:

1. **The long-term nature of the interaction** between the researcher and the participants as part of the fieldwork process.
2. **A wide range of relationship dynamics** such as differences in status between the two parties, differences in power and educational differences, as well as degrees of formality.
3. **The variety of settings**, from close interpersonal interactions to observing public gatherings and actual participation in social events.
4. In many cases, research takes place in **settings unfamiliar** to the researcher, which will make his/her presentation and interaction with others sensitive.
5. There may be **different ethical codes** between the groups studied and researcher's country or institution of origin.
6. **The changing nature of the researcher's roles** and relationships with the studied group over time.
7. **The use of technology** to document observations, including mapping, photography, and video and audio recording.

Advantages of Participant Observation

1. It provides results that lend validity to a proposed theory.
2. Participant observation provides high levels of flexibility for researchers.
3. More insights become available because of participant observation.
4. It provides practical advantages to data collection that other methods cannot use.
5. Participant observation can capture changing attitudes.
6. It opens the door for researcher speculation.
7. Researchers have more ways to produce real results.
8. The information gathered by participant observation as a predictive quality.
9. Participant observation can be an open-ended process.
10. It provides insight into an individual or group attitude.

Disadvantages of Participant Observation

1. Participant observation has a high risk of bias entering the data.
2. The representative sample being studied is relatively small.
3. It takes a lot of time to gather factual data using participant observation.
4. Ethical questions exist for this qualitative research method.
5. Self-selection can cause information bias to appear in the collected data.
6. Participant observation relies heavily on the skills of the researcher.
7. The data collected through participant observation is somewhat subjective.



8. Participant observation gathers situation-specific data.
9. It can be challenging to duplicate the results of participant observation work.

