

Assess the usefulness of participant observation in sociological research

One of the most popular and widely used research methods is Participant Observation. Participant observation involves the observer in the activities of the people in that society, so that instead of just observing the people, the observer is able to get a more hands-on experience of how these people live their lives. There are all sorts of problems with simple observation. There are places where observers are prohibited - in government, in much of business, and often in the bedroom, but even where a person is allowed in the existence of a passive observer sat in a corner perhaps taking notes disturbs the participants and makes them change their behaviour. One solution is to observe a situation where the presence of observers is considered more normal, but these are few and far between. Another strategy is to be in a place so often and for so long that it becomes normal to be there. The best solution is for the observer to get involved with the activities of the group being studied. The observer thus becomes a participant observer. This method is associated with social anthropology and symbolic interactions. It can be used with people who still want to study the large-scale issues that are seen to determine social reality and by that phenomenology's that are simply interested in meaning. An example of participant observation is a study by James Patrick on a particular gang group. And one by Barker on the Moonies and another by Lord Humphrey on homosexuality.

The main advantages of participant observation are that it allows the observer to obtain a deeper and more experienced insight on the activities that the individuals of a society perform hopefully with a minimum of disturbance. You find out what they do, not what they say they do and the ways in which they think and that it also allows the observers (anthropologists) to gain a good overview of how and why a society functions. You also find yourself taking up the sympathy and empathy of the participants and you becomes more able to tell the story of the subculture that was previously foreign to you. You also get over the problem of people innocently losing their memory or filling in the gaps as they do during interviews. You know what they did because you were there and you recorded it. They will tell you that certain things never happened but you were there and you know that they did happen. The other thing about participant observation is that it is good fun and you can make friends.

Participant observation is very often inductive in actual method so you find certain things happening that put a whole new impetus into research, and you then follow up what is in effect a new hypothesis perhaps using other research methods.

But there are disadvantages. One is the time required; another is the demand of participation, which may be illegal or dangerous. There is the potential of psychological change to who you are. The researcher can be accused of being subjective, especially if seen to be sympathetic, but even if only because of the necessary interpretation and retelling of the data. Furthermore you can never get away from the researcher effect, unless it is successfully covert.

The disadvantages of participant observation are that it is sometimes unwelcome by the society being studied; as they often feel disturbed and that the anthropologist is invading their privacy. It is also often difficult for the observer to go native, and, even

when he does; problems arise as he may begin to lose objectivity after becoming too much a part of that society.

The problems that can arise due to PO include:

- Gender - certain genders are welcomed than others into different societies. Women can be seen as inferior/ be threatening to men/ cant integrate w/ men.
- Ethnicity- ethnographers could be kept at a distance because of their ethnicity, or may find it hard to always be culturally relative.
- Culture shock- on the part of the ethnographer
- Expense- on the part of the ethnographer
- Interpretation- some things can be interpreted very differently from culture to culture.

Ethical problems can also arise due to PO. They can arise on both the part of the ethnographer and the people, which the ethnographer is studying.

There are also some Problems of ethnographer (the person observing). Associated with the activities performed by the society being studied. For example, whereas female genital mutilation is commonly practised in some areas of the world, an ethnographer studying people in area where this is practised who comes from a culture and background where this is considered unacceptable and inhumane may face serious moral problems. Should the ethnographer try and intervene and stop this practice, should he try and educate the people of this society about the wrongs of this activity or should he ignore his own morals and values in the name of cultural relativism?

There are also some Problems of society:
The people being studied often feel disturbed, distracted or that their privacy is being invaded when they are being studied by a stranger, who can often seem to be uninvited studying their every move. The people could argue that it is unfair for ethnographers to freely enter into a society and begin to study the people; his ways of thinking and living may often seem very different and unwelcome to certain societies. It is often very difficult for ethnographers to overcome these problems, as it is not easy to find a compromise between that which he wants to do and that which he must do in order to allow the people being studied feel most at ease.

Overall participant observations are useful in some ways and also can be a drawback. They are very useful to use in observations however can have some disadvantages. I would probably use this method as it can be quiet valid.