

# The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods

## Participant Observation

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Participant observation is a method of data collection in which the researcher takes part in everyday activities related to an area of social life in order to study an aspect of that life through the observation of events in their natural contexts. The purpose of participant observation is to gain a deep understanding of a particular topic or situation through the meanings ascribed to it by the individuals who live and experience it. The term was first used by social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski in the 1920s, and the approach was further developed by the Chicago School under the leadership of Robert Park and Howard Becker. Participant observation is regarded as being especially appropriate for studying social phenomena about which little is known and where the behavior of interest is not readily available to public view. Through its emphasis on firsthand access to the real world and its meanings it is effective in allowing understanding of the way of life of others.

Participant observation is characterized by emergent design involving a variety of methods including direct observation of human behavior and the physical features of settings, informal interviewing, and document analysis. Researchers adopt roles that have been described by Raymond Gold as varying along a continuum of participation ranging from complete observer [p. 599 ↓ ] (no participation), through participant-as-observer (more observer than participant) and observer-as-participant (more participant than observer) to complete participant. Data are typically recorded in the form of fieldnotes that, in order for the investigator to remain as unobtrusive as possible, are written up from memory either in secluded areas such as washrooms or at the end of the day. Participant observation usually entails prolonged engagement in the field that allows for gathering more detailed and accurate information. For example, a researcher who observes a setting for several months can identify discrepancies between what people say and what they actually do.

Several methodological problems are associated with participant observation. It is not well suited to the study of large groups or populations. Gaining access to social contexts of interest—in other words, obtaining permission to collect data, establishing credibility, and earning the trust of those being observed—can be very challenging. Personal characteristics such as gender, age, and ethnicity of the investigator can interfere with access. A variety of strategies are used by researchers to overcome access problems, such as choosing a setting to which one already has some relationship through work

or personal life, taking on a small task that benefits the group to be observed, and staying in the field long enough for habituation to occur. Finally, it is well known that the presence of an observer will change to at least some extent the context being studied that may threaten the trustworthiness of the data collected.

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*See also*

- [Access](#)
- [Nonparticipant Observation](#)
- [Observational Research](#)
- [Participant](#)
- [Prolonged Engagement](#)

#### Further Readings

Jorgensen, D. L. (1989). Participant observation: A methodology for human studies . Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Spradley, J. P. (1980). Participant observation . New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.