HOW DO SOCIOLOGISTS OBSERVE?

Perhaps the most obvious way to "do sociology" is just to watch people going about their everyday activities. We could observe people in exactly the same way that bird-watchers observe birds and then attempt descriptions and explanations of human social behaviour. In some ways sociological observers face similar problems to bird-watchers. If birds are aware of the presence of an observer they are likely to fly away. So people's behaviour can be affected if they are aware of being "watched". Because of this the researcher usually has to join in, to some extent, with the group being studied.

Some sociologists in some situations may be able to conduct **non-participant**, or **direct observation** where they do not participate at all and are a "fly on the wall". This may be possible at large events where many people are present or from behind a two-way mirror for example. Some sociologists, however, as you will see later, believe that we can only really understand human behaviour if we join in with it, thus discovering what it actually feels like to be that sort of person.

What is participant observation?

This approach was first developed outside sociology by anthropologists who study the variety of different societies and cultures in the world. In the early part of this century they began to live in the societies they were interested in. One of the most famous examples of this approach is Malinowski's research in the South Pacific Trobriand Islands where he lived during the First World War. Later in the 1920's and 1930's in America sociologists in Chicago borrowed this approach. They studied the lives of different types of people including tramps, gang members and the rich:

"They concentrated on observation of people in their "natural habitat," watching, listening, talking, taking life-histories and recording." (P. McNeill, "Research Methods", 2nd. ed. Tavistock, 1990)

In America in the 1950's and 1960's the sociological perspective called **interactionism** grew in importance. Sociologists became more and more interested in "getting inside the heads" of their subjects. Participant observation gave researchers a method to view the world through the eyes of other people. For example, in his famous book, "**Asylums**" Erving Goffman worked in a mental hospital and carried out participant observation by participating in the lives of the patients and talking to them.

What types of participant observation are there?

There are a number of different ways of doing participant observation. Some researchers for example hardly participate at all in the group they are observing while others are very much a part of the group. Some observers announce who they are and explain their research to their research subjects, other observers act secretly, pretending to be ordinary group members but in reality writing down what they observe. These different types of participant observation can be summarised like this:

Covert	Overt	Active	Remote
The researcher pretends to be an ordinary group member.	The researcher tells the group that he or she is conducting sociological research.	The researcher is involved in all of the activities carried out by the group.	The researcher stands apart from most of the activities carried out by the group.
Example	Example	Example	Example
Jason Ditton's research (1975) into "fiddling and pilfering" in a bakery would not have been possible had he revealed that he was a sociological	Janet Foster told the subjects of her research into petty crime, "Villains", (1990), that she was "doing a project" and "writing a book".	In "The Making of a Moonie" (1984), Eileen Barker attended a variety of courses and lectures organised by the sect.	Observation in schools often involves only a limited amount of participation, such as Geoffrey Walford's 1991 study of a City Technology College.

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How useful is participant observation?

Unlike other research methods participant observation allows the sociologist to look at people in their natural environment. It is often referred to as a **naturalistic** approach. The research does not artificially interfere with people's lives and they are free to act as normal. This allows the researcher to gain an insight which surveys cannot produce. This is illustrated by a well-known quote: *"As I sat and listened, I learned the answers to questions I would not have had the sens*e to ask *if I had been getting my information solely on an interview basis." (W. F. Whyte,"Street Corner Society", 3rd ed. Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981)*

The kind of data produced by participant observation is **qualitative**, that is to say it is a picture of the world through the eyes of people themselves, whether they be religious sect members, in a delinquent gang or school pupils. If the researcher can prevent their presence from altering behaviour then the data should also be **valid**: a true or "unpolluted" picture of behaviour.

For some types of research there may be no good alternative to participant observation. Certain deviant groups or behaviour would not be possible to study using any other method. Participant observation is particularly effective if a clearly identifiable group is being studied who are prepared to have an observer present.

The problems of participant observation can be identifed by asking some questions about it:

- ***Is the group which was studied typical?***
  This is the problem of **representativeness**. As participant observation takes such a long time to carry out it is unusual to study more than one group. There is no way of knowing if other gangs, sects or schools (for example) are the same.

- **Would a different person have achieved the same results?**
  This is the problem of **reliability**. Although the observations of one researcher may be very detailed and interesting there is no way of knowing that they are not a subjective view.

- ***Did the presence of the observer alter the behaviour of members of the group?***
  A particular problem for overt observation (but also for covert) is sometimes called **observer effect**. If people know they are being watched they usually behave differently. (Think of any times when someone has come to watch your teacher at work!)

- ***Has the researcher got so involved in the group that they have lost objectivity?***
  This was originally a problem for anthropologists and was called "**going native**". It can be a struggle for sociologists to make sure that they still "stand apart" from the group and don't become absorbed into it.

- ***Is participant observation an invasion of privacy?***
  This is the **ethical** problem faced by covert observers. Covert observation clearly raises problems because of its secretive nature and increasingly it is felt that researchers do not have the right to work in what some see as an under-hand way.

How popular is participant observation today?

Despite all the problems associated with participant observation and, in particular the accusation that it only produces subjective or personal views of social behaviour, it remains, along with unstructured or informal interviews, a vital part of many **ethnographic** studies (accounts of the "way of life" of particular groups). During your sociology course you are likely to come across a lot of important sociological evidence which has been produced by participant observation in areas such as education and deviance.

In order to improve the reliability and representativeness of participant observation some sociologists have combined it with other research methods. An often quoted example of this is the study of the "Moonies" (a sect or new religious movement) by **Eileen Barker** in which she uses highly active participation as well as questionnaires and interviews. The result is an understanding of the Moonies which not only helps us to understand the group through the eyes of some of its members but is also a representative survey of the group.

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GAINING ENTRY

*The examples on this page focus on the sociology of education and deviance, both areas where the technique of observation, particularly participant observation, is commonly used. They are taken from **Barrie Thorne**'s study of a school in America (Item A) and **Dick Hobbs'** celebrated research into working class criminal and police cultures in London (Item B). Both Thorne and Hobbs discuss the problem of "**gaining entry**" into the social situation they want to research.*

A

ENTERING THE WORLD OF THE SCHOOL

In my fieldwork with kids, I wanted to approach their social worlds as researchers approach the worlds of adults with open-ended curiosity, and with an assumption that kids are competent social actors who take an active role in shaping their daily experiences. I wanted to sustain an attitude of respectful discovery, to uncover and document kids' points of view and meanings. I set out to learn about gender in the context of kids' interactions with one another. I began to accompany fourth and fifth-graders in their daily round of activities by stationing myself in the back of Miss Bailey's classroom, sitting in the scaled-down chairs and standing and walking around the edges, trying to grasp different vantage points. I was clearly not a full participant; I didn't have a regular desk, and I watched and took notes, rather than doing the classroom work. As the kids lined up, I watched, and then walked alongside, often talking with them, as they moved between the classroom, lunchroom, music room, and library. At noon-time I sat and ate with the fourth and fifth graders at their two crowded cafeteria tables, and I left with them when they headed for noontime recess on the playground. Wanting to understand their social divisions and the varied perspectives they entailed, I alternated the company I kept, eating with different groups and moving among the various turfs and activities of the playground.

B. Thorne, "Gender Play", Open University Press, 1993

B

THE KEY INFORMANT

I became interested in the relationship between the detectives who frequented The Pump and the rest of the pub's clientele, an interest that coincided with an approach to coach a soccer team. When I realised that one of the parents who followed the team was Simon, a detective who used The Pump, I willingly gave up one evening a week and my Sunday mornings to stand freezing in a damp field cajoling various Waynes, Damiens, Troys, and Justins to "close each other down" and such like. My relationship with Simon steered the course of the research during those early months. Our relationship was most enjoyable and was initially a trading relationship; I had coaching skills that might complement his son's outstanding athletic ability, and he had knowledge of, and contacts in, the CID. Simon emerged as my principal police informant, granting me both formal and informal interviews, access to documents, and introductions to individuals and settings that would otherwise be inaccessible.

D. Hobbs, "Doing the Business", Oxford University Press, 1989

ACTIVITY

1. Explain in your own words Barrie Thorne's objective in using participant observation. (Item A)
2. Explain Dick Hobbs statement that his relationship with Simon was a "trading relationship". (Item B)
3. Compare the extent to which Hobbs and Thorne participated in the situations they were observing. Why do you think they participated differently?
4. Why are "key informants" such as Simon (Item B) often so important in participant observation?

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THE ROLE OF THE OBSERVER

A

PARTICIPANT AND NON-PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

"It is important not to exaggerate the difference between participant observation and non-participant observation. As a participant observer, you undertake a role within a group or institution. In the case of a school, for example, you might do some teaching so that you can understand better the mental processes, perspectives and problems faced by a person occupying that role. In non-participant observation, you observe a situation from a detached position which doesn't intrude or take over any of the roles of the people interacting in that situation. A term often used is a "fly on a wall". The problem with this model is that observers are not flies and, with schools in particular, the observer inevitably influences the interaction to some degree. The non-participant observer doesn't deliberately undertake a role, but may be forced into one. For example, I have recently been researching in primary schools observing a class of seven year olds. It is impossible to sit in a class of seven year olds and not be drawn into their interaction. Young children will respond to you as a teacher, an adult, a parent. They are very forthcoming, totally uninhibited, they like having someone else there. They drag you in."

P. Woods, interviewed in "Society Today 2", P. McNeill, Macmillan, 1991

B

IN A CITY TECHNOLOGY COLLEGE

The problem with the status of "visitor" was that I had to fight to try to indicate that I was *not* to be treated as a visitor. I was there to observe the college warts and all, and not to be the recipient of image management. This took a long time. It was four weeks before I saw more than the most minor rowdiness or misbehaviour in classrooms. Before that, the presence of a "visitor" had been such that individuals within groups would sometimes chastise other students, by giving a look in my direction. They wanted to maintain the college's reputation if they possibly could. However, eventually, I sat in wonder as a group of boys behaved as 12 year olds do - hitting each other, moving from chair to chair, mock wrestling, and then becoming innocent and busy workers at the approach of the teacher. Again I became amazed at the ability of children convincingly to change their topic of conversation mid-sentence as a teacher comes within earshot. The teacher knew little of what was going on behind his back.

adapted from G. Walford, "Researching the City Technology College, Kingshurst", in R. Burgess, "Research Methods", Nelson,1993

C

OBSERVING THE ìMOONIESî

Of course it was known that I was not a Moonie. I never pretended that I was, or that I was likely to become one. I admit that I was sometimes evasive, and I certainly did not always say everything that was on my mind, but I cannot remember any occasion on which I consciously lied to a Moonie. Being known as a non-member had its disadvantages, but by talking to people who had left the movement I was able to check that I was not missing any of the internal information which was available to rank-and-file members. At the same time, being an outsider who was "inside" had enormous advantages. I was allowed (even, on certain occasions, expected) to ask questions that no member would have presumed to ask either his leaders or his peers. Furthermore, several Moonies who felt that their problems were not understood by the leaders, and yet would not have dreamed of being disloyal to the movement by talking to their parents or other outsiders, could confide in me because of the very fact that I was both organisationally and emotionally uninvolved.

E. Barker, "The Making of a Moonie", Blackwell, 1984

ACTIVITY

1. Referring to Item A, why is non-participant observation so difficult in a school? In what social situations might it be possible?
2. What status did Geoffrey Walford (Item B) begin with and why was this a problem? What enabled Walford to overcome these problems?
3. Referring to both Items B and C, explain why you think Geoffrey Walford and Eileen Barker used participant observation as part of their research.
4. Using material from the Items and elsewhere, assess the advantages and disadvantages of overt and covert roles in participant observation.

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EVALUATING PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

A

CITY POLICE

Rubenstein (1973) went almost to the point of becoming a policeman - he worked as a crime reporter, completed the police training, and rode as an "armed observer" in patrol cars in Philadelphia - and perhaps that degree of involvement has helped to produce what will surely become a classic. His *City Police* is an insider's view of backstage police behaviour. In microscopic detail, Rubenstein takes us into the policeman's world. Although he never directly spells out his own involvement in encounters - did he ever draw or use his gun? Did he ever have to fight? Did he assist in arrests? - He clearly got inside the skins of the patrolmen. The information he collected on violence and corruption could only have been gained by a trained observer who was accepted by the policemen. The complete observer role is a fiction because he or she is always part of the situation and because distancing oneself from the police role - say by explaining at each encounter to the citizen the reason for an academic's presence - may destroy precisely what one wishes to observe.

M. Punch, "Observation and the Police", in "Social Research", ed. M. Hammersley, Sage, 1979

B

ENDLESS PRESSURE

A study such as this one has its drawbacks from the point of view of hard science. To name some: the selection of the hypotheses explored was guided by my own biases; I freely use statistical terms such as "most," "many," "the majority of," when in fact the actual number of people on which these generalisations are based is a mere fraction compared with the total number making up the community; and the evidence presented is illustrative rather than systematic.

A further problem arising out of the built-in limitations of the participant observation technique is that as a male researcher I had only limited access to the women in the West Indian community for research purposes because in any working class community there is a tendency for males and females in all age groups to associate in single-sex peer groups.

adapted from K. Pryce, "Endless Pressure", Penguin, 1979

C

DOING THE BUSINESS

In CID offices my role was overt, and due to poor image management during the early stages of the research I was extremely obtrusive. On one occasion I attended a semi-formal non-police function with Simon, and I dressed in a manner that I considered smart, yet comfortable: open-necked shirt, sleeveless Fair Isle sweater, and corduroy trousers. Simon told me I looked like "a fucking social worker - where's your bike clips and bobble hat?" I retreated to the toilet, glanced in the mirror and, yes, I did look like a fucking social worker.

In pubs and clubs I had to blend in sartorially; I could not be obtrusive. As a consequence I now possess a formidable array of casual shirts with an assortment of logos on the left breast. This awareness of my appearance, and acknowledgement of the importance of image-management held me in good stead for the next stage of my work. I had never intentionally tried to look like a CID officer, and I found I was still regarded as "one of the chaps" and for the most part I spoke, acted, drank, and generally behaved as though I was not doing research. Indeed, I often had to remind myself that I was not in a pub to enjoy myself, but to conduct an academic inquiry.

D. Hobbs, "Doing the Business", Oxford University Press, 1989

ACTIVITY

1. Items A and C both stress the importance of "joining in" while conducting participant observation. What advantages does this bring to the observer?
2. What limitations of participant observation does Ken Pryce (Item B) identify?
3. In Item C, Dick Hobbs refers to the problems of being "obtrusive" during the early stages of his research, and having to remind himself that he *was* an observer during the latter stages. What problems might be caused as a result of these two situations?
4. Using material from the Items and elsewhere, assess the usefulness of participant observation as a method of social research.

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