

UNFAMILIAR OBSERVATION—USE THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

The purpose of inductive, qualitative research is to raise research questions and raise/develop hypotheses. This assignment will have you identify norms and other traits of an unfamiliar subculture. Visit a public social situation/facility unfamiliar to you and observe cultural and social traits such as type of people, how they interact, norms/values, context, and your own feelings about being there. Try to see the big picture from a micro-level social situation. Instead of it being totally strange, is there an equivalent function in your own culture?

You may not use or recall events past—you did not have your "sociological" eyes on.

Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide writes:

What is participant observation?

Participant observation is a qualitative method with roots in traditional ethnographic research, whose objective is to help researchers learn the perspectives held by study populations. As qualitative researchers, we presume that there will be multiple perspectives within any given community. We are interested both in knowing what those diverse perspectives are and in understanding the interplay among them.

Qualitative researchers accomplish this through observation alone or by both observing and participating, to varying degrees, in the study community's daily activities. Participant observation always takes place in community settings, in locations believed to have some relevance to the research questions. The method is distinctive because the researcher approaches participants in their own environment rather than having the participants come to the researcher. Generally speaking, the researcher engaged in participant observation tries to learn what life is like for an "insider" while remaining, inevitably, an "outsider."

While in these community settings, researchers make careful, objective notes about what they see, recording all accounts and observations as field notes in a field notebook. Informal conversation and interaction with members of the study population are also important components of the method and should be recorded in the field notes, in as much detail as possible. Information and messages communicated through mass media such as radio or television may also be pertinent and thus desirable to document.

What can we learn from participant observation?

Data obtained through participant observation serve as a check against participants' subjective reporting of what they believe and do. Participant observation is also useful for gaining an understanding of the physical, social, cultural, and economic contexts in which study participants live; the relationships among and between people, contexts, ideas, norms, and events; and people's behaviors and activities – what they do, how frequently, and with whom.

In addition, the method enables researchers to develop a familiarity with the cultural milieu that will prove invaluable throughout the project. It gives them a nuanced understanding of context

that can come only from personal experience. There is no substitute for witnessing or participating in phenomena of human interaction – interaction with other people, with places, with things, and with states of being such as age and health status. Observing and participating are integral to understanding the breadth and complexities of the human experience – an overarching research endeavor for any public health or development project.

It is important to document what is actually taking place rather than what you were expecting to see and to not let your expectations affect your observations.

The purpose of participant observation is partly to confirm what you already know (or think you know) but is mostly to discover unanticipated truths. It is an exercise of discovery.

Also, avoid reporting your interpretation rather than an objective account of what you observe. To interpret is to impose your own judgment on what you see. For example, an interpretive description of a street corner might be that it was “dirty and overly crowded.” An objective description would be that “there was garbage everywhere and there were so many people around that it was difficult to move.” The danger of not separating interpretation from observation is that your interpretations can turn out to be wrong. This can lead to invalid study results, which can ultimately be damaging for the study population.

You can work on reporting neutral observations by questioning yourself often about your assertions. Ask yourself, “What is my evidence for this claim?”

Table 3. What to observe during participant observation

Category	Includes	Researchers should note
Appearance	Clothing, age, gender, physical appearance	Anything that might indicate membership in groups or in sub-populations of interest to the study, such as profession, social status, socioeconomic class, religion, or ethnicity
Verbal behavior and interactions	Who speaks to whom and for how long; who initiates interaction; languages or dialects spoken; tone of voice	Gender, age, ethnicity, and profession of speakers; dynamics of interaction
Physical behavior and gestures	What people do, who does what, who interacts with whom, who is not interacting	How people use their bodies and voices to communicate different emotions; what individuals' behaviors indicate about their feelings toward one another, their social rank, or their profession
Personal space	How close people stand to one another	What individuals' preferences concerning personal space suggest about their relationships
Human traffic	People who enter, leave, and spend time at the observation site	Where people enter and exit; how long they stay; who they are (ethnicity, age, gender); whether they are alone or accompanied; number of people
People who stand out	Identification of people who receive a lot of attention from others	The characteristics of these individuals; what differentiates them from others; whether people consult them or they approach other people; whether they seem to be strangers

		or well known by others present
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From *Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide*. MACK ,WOODSONG
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Location

Some possible locations are (let me know other places which might be good):

- Islamic Mosque
- Black or Asian church
- Police station, courtroom, or hospital waiting area
- Bus or Train station
- Laundromat (if you've never been in one)
- Gay bar/Gay church
- Mexican or other ethnic bar/church/Quinceañera
- Dallas Symphony, Dallas Opera, ballet (not a school orchestra)
- Work situation which is not commonly seen

Observe

Take your time to get a feel of the location. This may take TWO hours. What may seem mundane will become significant. Patiently learn the norms and other cultural behavior these people have. Are they following norms which might be different from your own life? How does your own ethnocentricity affect your analysis? Connect specific behavior to the larger picture. Do you see these confusing issues in the news? What core concepts are involved?

Take lots of field notes, in great detail. You might not perceive patterns until you read back through them. Only add relevant field notes in your paper. You may not use past experiences, as you did not have "sociological eyes" then.

What to write

Start with all the facts, who, what, when, where... Use exact times, dates, locations. Use *qualitative* rather than quantitative assessments. Provide a rich narrative. You are the measuring instrument. Half of your paper should be descriptive; half should be analysis.

A description of your own background (ethnicity, class, gender) and how unfamiliar you are with the situation will give the reader an idea of your “biased” interpretation. Be objective about your observations—do not use your own norms' labeling or stereotypes.

Do not “read” people’s minds—you can perceive behavior but not attitude. If you unavoidably interact or become a participant, be nice. Don’t lie, mislead, or agitate. Don't gather personal info. Say you’re doing a college class assignment. Leave, if they ask you to leave (and write about it). Almost everyone feels uncomfortable, but feel that it's your duty as a Sociologist to be there. Visit another location or do it again if you don't get adequate data. Qualitative researchers may do this many times, over many months.

Analysis

Apply theories from the textbook to understand your observation. Did what you observe fall into any particular chapter/topic? Explain how the textbook theories explain what you saw. Your grade is based on your analysis as a Sociologist.

Do not write about yourself ("I learned so much about these people...", "I was so enlightened..."). Do not write about the friends you made and how fortunate people were. This is a critical analysis. Be an expert analyst. You must hypothesize how small details relate to the larger social environment. Use headings and other techniques to make your paper clear. Submit on Schoology (attach AND paste in window). Only submit .doc, .rtf, .pdf or text files. No .wpd, .odt, .zip or extension-less files.

Date

Time

Location

Name of your observed place? Describe its purpose.

Write in FULL sentences. Do not just respond yes/no or with just one sentence. Your reader cannot read your mind. Recall specific examples.

Describe the environment (size, busy, loud, outside, dark, wet, ...)

Describe the people (age, gender, dyads/triads etc, style, behavior, perceived emotions)

Describe the level of cultural homogeneity—are individuals generally of the same description above? Do they all behave the same? (eg in a concert hall, the people would most likely applaud at the same time).

Is the level of required conformity to norms great? How would individuals who don't match the above description fit in? (people in shorts would not fit in a funeral)

Describe other analogous places (or times) in which would serve the same function as this place. (or is this place truly unique in its purpose/function?)

Do the norms of this place allow for certain behaviors? (yelling is allowed at a baseball park)

Are these norms part of a certain ethnic or sub-culture? Did they appear to be long-established norms or improvised?

Did you feel like you had to alter your behavior in this place? How? How did this place make you feel uncomfortable? Was it just because you did not know anyone, or because of other things?

Are there micro-level interactions which relate to the larger social structure? (social forces from the past/larger culture which affect individual behavior or understanding)

Conclusion. Provide an understanding of the situation. Your reader should be able to visualize the situation and understand the social dynamics present. While some of the above questions

may not be applicable, this conclusion is important. The reader must come away with learning something new about social dynamics in your particular observation.