



Participant-observation ^[1]

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Participant-observation is one of the key research methods in anthropology. It is often used by sociocultural anthropologists, and other academics, in attempt to thoroughly understand the various aspects of a culture.

Participant-observation is a method where researchers choose to live directly in the cultural group they are studying. By living and immersing oneself within a culture for a long period of time, participant-observation allows anthropologists to get deeper into the complexity of culture.

Participant-observation is a type of field research that produces qualitative data. It can involve note-taking, interviewing, and journaling about experiences in a different cultural group. Often researchers choose different theoretical approaches to guide the type of information they're interested in, but participant-observation is largely a holistic study—meaning it considers all aspects of a culture to be interrelated and relevant.

Often, the production of participant-observation research is ethnography ^[3]. Ethnographies are detailed accounts of a culture, mentioning everything from political structure to subsistence methods and insights.

History

Participant-observation was popularized within anthropology through its use by several well-known anthropologists in the 20th century, including Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead. Today, it is well recognized within the social sciences as a viable and popular research method.

Types

There are different types of participant-observation that researchers can undertake. In some situations, the researcher chooses and requests to play an active role in that culture—including living with a local family, participating in cultural rituals and activities, speaking the language, and much more. While this type of participant-observation allows researchers to delve deeper into a culture by forming relationships, it could potentially entail less objective results, since the researcher is emotionally invested in the culture and its people.

In contrast, a less involved type of participant-observation would include simply being a bystander in the culture in question. This allows for a more objective approach, yet individuals may be more hesitant to answer questions—creating a less in-depth study.

Ethical concerns

Whenever any type of research is done with human participants, ethical considerations should be taken into account. Today, anthropologists are hugely concerned with ethics. Before conducting a study or field research, the study must first be approved by an ethics board. Afterwards, researchers must follow strict guidelines regarding their study, in order to avoid harm and minimize long-lasting impact to the participants.

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