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## Participant Observation

### WHAT IS PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION?

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Participant observation is in some ways both the most natural and the most challenging of qualitative data collection methods. It connects the researcher to the most basic of human experiences, discovering through immersion and participation the hows and whys of human behavior in a particular context. Such discovery is natural in that all of us have done this repeatedly throughout our lives, learning what it means to be members of our own families, our ethnic and national cultures, our work groups, and our personal circles and associations. The challenge of harnessing this innate capability for participant observation is that when we are participant observers in a more formal sense, we must, at least a little, systematize and organize an inherently fluid process. This means not only being a player in a particular social milieu but also fulfilling the role of researcher—taking notes; recording voices, sounds, and images; and asking questions that are designed to uncover the meaning behind the behaviors. Additionally, in many cases, we are trying to discover and analyze aspects of social scenes that use rules and norms that the participants may experience without explicitly talking about, that operate on automatic or subconscious levels, or are even officially off limits for discussion or taboo. The result of this discovery and systemization is that we not only make ourselves into acceptable participants in some venue but also generate data that can meaningfully add to our collective understanding of human experience.

Participant observation is used across the social sciences, as well as in various forms of commercial, public policy, and nonprofit research. Anthropology and sociology, in particular, have relied on participant observation for many of their seminal

insights, and for most anthropologists and many sociologists, doing a participant observation study at a field site is an important rite of passage into the discipline. Bronislaw Malinowski's (1922) work among the Trobriand Islanders is not only one of the foundational works of ethnography, but it is also one of the earliest to both exemplify and articulate the value of participant observation. Sociologists also conducted participant observation studies and discussed the use of the technique early on, including Beatrice Webb (1926) in the 1880s and the Chicago school of urban sociologists in the 1920s (Park, Burgess, & McKenzie, 1925).

For most people, these early studies create the iconic images of participant observation being performed by either an anthropologist—a somewhat field-worn character living in a remote village learning the ways of an exotic culture by deep and lengthy immersion in the day-to-day lives of the people—or an urban sociologist becoming wise in the ways of a gritty inner-city slum. (The anthropologist image has produced the old joke that a household in a native village consists of a married couple, their parents, their children, and the graduate student. When you retell this joke, feel free to insert your favorite study culture and locale for the native village.) While these images of participant observation focus on the sort of long-term research endeavor exemplified by ethnography, the technique is very flexible and can be employed to great benefit in addressing a range of research objectives. Many participant observation studies are not as lengthy in duration as ethnography, are less comprehensive in scope, and are conducted in relatively mundane locations. But even when it is used on a limited basis, there is no denying the power of this technique to produce penetrating insights and highly contextual understanding.

Almost any setting in which people have complex interactions with each other, with objects, or with their physical environment can be usefully examined through participant observation. Since doing participant observation means being embedded in the action and context of a social setting, we consider three key elements of a participant observation study:

1. *Getting into the location of whatever aspect of the human experience you wish to study.* This means going to where the action is—people's communities, homes, workplaces, recreational sites, places of commercial interaction, sacred sites, and the like. Participant observation is almost always conducted in situ.
2. *Building rapport with the participants.* The point of participant observation is that you wish to observe and learn about the things people do in the normal course of their lives. That means they have to accept you, to some extent, as someone they can "be themselves" in front of. While you don't necessarily have to be viewed as a complete insider, a successful participant observer has to inspire enough trust and acceptance to enable her research participants to act much as they would if the researcher were not present.

3. *Spending enough time interacting to get the needed data.* The informal, embedded nature of participant observation means that you cannot always just delve straight into all the topics that address your research issues and then leave. You must spend time both building rapport and observing or participating for a long enough period to have a sufficient range of experiences, conversations, and relatively unstructured interviews for your analysis. Depending on the scope of the project and your research questions, this may take anywhere from days to weeks, months, or even years, and it may involve multiple visits to the research site(s).

There is a reason that the phrase “you had to be there” is a cliché used by those who feel their verbal descriptions have not fully captured the essence of some scene or event. The phrase encapsulates a genuine truth—there are often important elements of human experience that are only visible to those who are actually there. Participant observation excels in capturing these elements, particularly:

- Rules and norms that are taken for granted by experienced participants or cultural insiders
  - For example, unspoken rules exist about who sits where at a meeting, what sort of encouragement listeners give to speakers to keep them talking (or deny to them in order to get them to shut up!), how many times a guest must refuse food before accepting it from a host, and so on.
  - While these rules can be elicited through interviews, it is often more efficient to learn them in situ and as they happen.
- Routine actions and social calculations that happen below the level of conscious thought
  - For example, things like the movements of parents when loading and unloading vehicles when both cargo and children are part of the scene or unconscious adjustments that salesmen make to their pitch in response to equally unconscious cues from potential buyers.
  - In these cases, interviews might miss the action entirely—a parent describing how they put the kids and the cargo in their car will not generally mention all the times they adjust the relative position of doors, kids, seatbelts, and objects so as to never leave a child or a precious object, such as a purse, exposed. A camera could capture all their movements but would not capture the reasons for them. Watching and talking to parents as they load their vehicles provides a much more complete view of this behavior and the rules that govern it.

- Actions and thoughts that are not generally recognized as part of the “story,” such as personal rituals and routines, are sometimes missed or hard to uncover in conventional interviews because people may not think to mention them or may consider it silly to bring them up
  - For example, many business people have good luck rituals they engage in before setting off on an important trip or appointment. But their answers to questions about how they prepare for an important meeting will almost never reveal that, for example, they always kiss or touch their children’s picture before heading to a key meeting or departing on a business trip.

For all these types of topics and many more, your research can benefit hugely from being there. And when you have to be there, participant observation is the method of choice.

## DIRECT OBSERVATION VERSUS PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

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*“An observer is under the bed. A participant observer is in it.”*

—spoken by John Whiting, age 80-something, to an undergraduate class when he was a guest lecturer at UC Irvine

The important distinction between direct observation and participant observation so pithily captured in Dr. Whiting’s remark is critical to users of both observation methods. Direct observation is primarily a quantitative technique in which the observer is explicitly counting the frequency and/or intensity of specific behaviors or events or mapping the social composition and action of a particular scene. While most direct observation data collection is conducted by actual observers, many direct observation studies do not technically require a human data collector. The data captured in direct observation are, by definition, those that can be *observed* and do not inherently require any interaction between the observer and those being studied. In principle, an audio or video recording setup, if properly placed, could record the phenomena of interest without the researcher ever appearing on the scene. In actuality of course, most direct observation studies are far easier to conduct with a human observer—humans are often both cheaper and more comprehensive than video or audio recording—and it is common to conduct some form of interviews during direct observation. But

the distinction is still there—direct observation is about observable behavior and is typically associated with research objectives that require some sort of ordinal data or purely factual description: how often, how many, how intensely, who was there, and the like. As such, direct observation is normally a fairly structured form of data collection.

In contrast, participant observation is inherently a qualitative and interactive experience and relatively unstructured. It is generally associated with exploratory and explanatory research objectives—why questions, causal explanations, uncovering the cognitive elements, rules, and norms that underlie the observable behaviors. The data generated are often free flowing and the analysis much more interpretive than in direct observation. And it is this aspect of participant observation that is the method's greatest strength as well as the source of critiques that sometimes surround participant observation studies.

Embedding into a scene as a participant inevitably means that the information collected is, in certain ways, unique to the individual collecting the data. While anyone living in a traditional village in India would become aware of the caste system and would learn its rules, the experience of that system would be very different for a male participant observer belonging to a high ranking caste than it would to a female participant observer of a lower ranking caste. We would expect these two different participant observers to notice different nuances of how the caste system operates, to have different experiences of the consequences of violating caste rules, and possibly to make different judgments of the benefits and costs of the caste system to its participants and to Indian society as a whole.

Indeed, one of the reasons for doing participant observations is that many aspects of some social milieus are only visible to insiders, and only certain people can get inside. For example, Liza Dalby's (1983) famous study of geisha culture could have been written only by someone who was female, fluent in Japanese, and willing to undergo at least some of the lengthy and rigorous training required to become a geisha. No matter how interested a male researcher might be in geisha culture, there is simply no way he could be apprenticed as a geisha. By the same token, we can assume that Dalby's status as a *gai kokujin*—a person not of Japanese ancestry—made her geisha experience somewhat different than that of someone of Japanese heritage. For some readers, her description is a compelling blend of outsider objectivity and insider knowledge, exemplifying both insider and outsider perspectives. Others doubt that any *gaijin* (the common, less respectful term for a non-Japanese) was ever allowed far enough inside geisha life to provide a "real" description of it. For both camps, the subjective and personal aspects of participant observation are central to the argument—either enabling a viewpoint that could be captured no other way or skewing that viewpoint so much that the findings are in question.

## WHY USE PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION?

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Almost anyone who has ever visited a foreign land, been a visitor to an unfamiliar social environment, or joined someone else's family as a spouse or even as a casual guest can understand some of the ways in which participant observation can be useful. Bernard (2006) identifies five reasons for conducting participant observation research. The reasons listed below are Bernard's, with explanatory comments from this book's authors.

1. *Opening up the areas of inquiry to collect a wider range of data.* Only those with the privileges accorded to participants can observe certain sorts of events. In most social groups, there are things that outsiders are simply not allowed to do, see, or know. You cannot collect data about these things if you aren't on the inside as a participant.
2. *Reducing the problem of reactivity.* People change their behavior around outsiders, and if you have an interest in "normal" behavior, you have to stop being someone around whom people make these adjustments. A successful participant observer fits into the scene well enough to be ignored, even if he is doing abnormal things such as interviewing, taking pictures, recording video or audio, or taking notes.
3. *Enabling researchers to know what questions to ask.* Being embedded in the social context helps researchers learn what questions are relevant and to ask them in terms that make sense to the "natives." The value of participant observation at the early stages of learning about an unfamiliar culture or social setting can be huge. One of the most common errors in designing survey questions or in-depth interview guides is asking questions that are not sensible to the research participants or that are asked in some form of "research speak" rather than the local vernacular. Participant observation teaches you what to ask about and how to ask it.
4. *Gaining intuitive understanding of the meaning of your data.* The interpretation of qualitative data is always a somewhat subjective activity, and those who question the validity of qualitative methods often point to examples of studies in which the researchers grossly misunderstood something that was obvious to knowledgeable insiders or members of the studied culture or social group. Participant observation gives you an intimate knowledge of your area of study that greatly reduces this type of validity error. As someone who has directly experienced the social phenomena of interest, you are capable of taking positions about the meaning of your data with confidence that you are "getting it right."

5. *Addressing problems that are simply unavailable to other data collection techniques.* For many types of human experience there are no books, official sets of rules, or formal training of children or newcomers. This is true for many of aspects of our private and public life—how our organizations and institutions work, how we make our living, how we grow and develop to be a member of our various social groups. We learn these things by doing them, and if you want to learn about them, there is often no substitute for doing them yourself, as a participant observer.

In addition to Bernard's five reasons for using participant observation, there are also some other benefits of using the technique. These include the following:

1. *To establish the topics of inquiry for later, more structured data collection.* If your knowledge of a social milieu is so minimal you aren't even sure what topics might exist to ask about—participant observation is an excellent starting point.
2. *To avoid suspect self-reported data.* There are some topics for which people cannot or will not accurately report their own behavior (petty criminality, violations of social norms, etc.). Participant observation can lessen this form of self-report bias and obtain a more valid understanding of these behaviors.
3. *To identify behaviors that might go unreported or be missed due to the limitations of procedural memory.* Highly routine or unconscious behaviors are notoriously easy to miss during interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Seeing these occur in a participant observation setting allows them to become part of the data.
4. *To lessen reporting biases.* Those without direct knowledge of a social scene may collect data that reflect their own points of view rather than the social reality of the people in it. Edmund Leach (1967) famously corrected an earlier study of land use in Sri Lanka when his participant observations in the area showed that the earlier study had used a definition of *household* that did not conform to local understanding and that skewed the data to a false conclusion about village disintegration.
5. *To integrate the observed behavior into its physical context.* If the location and setting of the behavior of interest are critical to understanding, participant observation allows you to see and experience how the setting and the behavior interact.
6. *To see the behavior you are interested in as it happens.* If your research questions are about observable behaviors, why settle for merely hearing about them secondhand? Seeing is believing, and seeing is often data collection, as well. Participant observation puts you in direct contact with the phenomena of interest in a way unrivaled by other data collection techniques.

One of the most compelling examples of the value of participant observation in gaining insights that would be hard to capture through any other research method is the work done by Stephen Koester (Koester & Hoffer, 1994) among injection drug users in Denver. In the early 1990s, public education and needle-exchange programs to lessen needle sharing and its associated disease risks were active. Considerable evidence existed that the messages had been heard and understood by injection drug users and that needle sharing had, indeed, been greatly reduced. Nevertheless, rates of disease transmission remained unacceptably high among this population. Having established rapport among a Denver community of IV drug injectors, Koester conducted participant observations at “shooting galleries” and came up with some extremely important information.

The injection drug users were, in fact, no longer sharing needles. But other forms of sharing—*things the original researchers and public health officials had not known to ask about*—were occurring. Drug injectors shared other equipment, such as cottons and cookers in which drugs were filtered and prepared. Also, some users practiced *back-filling*, opening the back of a syringe so that a friend could draw a specified amount of drugs from it. These sources of cross contamination, dubbed “indirect sharing,” were potentially responsible for the continued transmission of HIV and hepatitis among the IV drug user population. Subsequent education campaigns added references to the dangers of indirect sharing, with an aim to reducing this disease transmission channel.

## THE ROLE OF PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

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The most traditional use of participant observation is at the exploratory stages of the research on a new topic, culture, venue, or behavior. In these situations, it is hard to beat participant observation for the sheer volume of insight and information that can be collected. Spending time working, playing, or living with people will produce data that would require dozens of interviews or focus groups to uncover. And, as indicated in the example of Koester’s IV drug user research, there are often findings that might be completely missed using other methods.

But participant observation can also play an important role when examining topics where there is already a considerable body of knowledge. As with other qualitative methods, participant observation can often help explain quantitative findings by providing the contextual meaning behind other data. In these cases, the participant observation may occur after or at the same time as other forms of data collection, such as analysis of secondary data or a quantitative survey. The participant observation may be used to explain apparent contradictions in other data—as in Koester’s



work, to learn the causal relationship behind a numerically observed correlation—or to confirm or gain face validity (sometimes referred to as triangulation) for the findings produced by another research method.

The ability of participant observation to provide explanation, context, causation, and confirmation means that it is often a useful element to include in a mixed method study. As indicated above, the participant observation may occur at multiple stages of the research—either early on as an exploratory element or later as an explanatory or confirmatory element. The example below in Table 3.1 highlights the points in a multiyear, mixed methods study where participant observation played a role. In this research, a large manufacturer of customized adhesive labels was looking for opportunities among health care providers, such as doctors' offices and hospital and medical labs, in response to both concerns about avoiding medical care errors and new laws related to patient privacy and records handling.

**Table 3.1** Using Participant Observation Across Multiple Phases of Research

Phase of Research	Examples
Phase 1—exploratory	On-site participant observation of labeling of medical records, lab samples, patients, equipment
Phase 2—questionnaire development	Focus groups with key audiences to decide content and wording for quantitative surveys
Phase 3—survey	Quantitative survey focused on labeling practices and spending
Phase 4—concept test	Product concepts developed and interest assessed through an online quantitative survey
Phase 5—in situ prototype use test	Working prototypes developed and placed for on-site use test. On-site participant observation of prototypes in actual use followed by in-depth interviews to determine prototype strengths, weaknesses, areas for re-design
Phase 6—large scale use test of final products	Final products tested in-use, with survey to finalize pricing and target marketing

When considering use of participant observation to address your research objectives, you must also consider the things it does *not* do well. The potential drawbacks of participant observation include these elements:

- *Potentially and unpredictably time consuming.* You may be in the field for a while before you learn much that addresses your research objectives, and it can be difficult to estimate in advance how long the study will take. If you are

in a time-is-money situation, you may need to address your objectives through a quicker or more predictable approach.

- Highly “practitioner-sensitive.” The results you get from participant observation may be idiosyncratic, difficult to compare with the findings of others, or simply biased.
- Sometimes difficult to generalize from. It can be hard to know if the findings seen in participant observation are typical of other sites, times, and circumstances, potentially limiting the value of the data or leaving the interpretation of the findings open to challenge.
- Your audience may not respect it. The very flexible, naturalistic nature of participant observation causes some research sponsors or data users to dismiss it as unscientific or as a form of tourism rather than data collection.

In considering a participant observation study, it is important to confront these issues head-on. Consider your research objectives and be realistic about what participant observation can and cannot do to help you address them. Is the participant observation going to be the primary focus of your findings, as it might be in a traditional ethnography? Or is it an exploratory exercise to pave the way for more structured sorts of data collection? Will more than one person take part in the participant observation? If so, how will the analysis address any differences in what they observe? Do you plan to confirm any of your participant observation findings with other types of data such as formal interviews (informal interviews are almost always part of participant observation), surveys, social network mapping, direct observation, cultural domain analysis, or text analysis? If so, how will these additional data fit into the data collection and analysis time line and budget? In short, draw on participant observation’s strengths and have a plan for eliminating or addressing its weaknesses.

## HOW TO CONDUCT PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

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The very flexible nature of participant observation means that the researcher has considerable leeway in how to design and conduct the data collection. As with any other qualitative research endeavor, the primary consideration that determines how you go about your participant observation is your research objectives. Accordingly, the details provided below, organized in roughly chronological order for most projects, are intended as guidelines rather than strict rules. The highly individualized nature of participant observation means that virtually every researcher will need to adapt these guidelines, at least in places, to his or her

research situation, the objectives of the research project, and the individual's own personal style.

### Choosing the Research Venue(s)

Most participant observation is conducted at field sites where the activity that is the topic of the study naturally occurs. For participant observation, your choice of venues determines your sample (who, where, what you will observe) and is therefore critical to how well your data address your research objectives and the generalizability (or lack thereof) of your findings.

If you know at least a little bit about the people, behavior, or events that you wish to study, you will probably have a pretty good idea of at least some of the places you can go to observe them. For example, if you are interested in child rearing, you will need to choose venues—homes, schools, family-oriented places and events—where adults interact with children and attempt to shape their behavior. Similarly, studies of professional behavior may take you to people's workplaces, while for projects involving political movements, you might include meetings and rallies among your research sites.

A very important consideration in choosing your venues is scale—the scale of your research objectives, the scale of your project in terms of funds, labor and other key resources, and even the geographical scale of the venue(s). For example, participant observation that is intended to be a primary data source for an ethnography of an entire tribal group will require a large scale effort in both time and, quite possibly, geography. In contrast, a study of how IRS (Internal Revenue Service) agents use their organization's website could be geographically restricted to a single IRS building and might take only a few days to provide the key insights. Be sure that your choice of venues matches the scale of your intended study. In choosing your participant observation venue(s) ask yourself a few key questions:

- Where does the activity of interest occur? Is it always in the same place(s), or does it move around?
- Is the phenomenon of interest time specific (such as a traditional festival or celebration), or is it always there (such as customer-server interactions in a bar)?
- If there is more than one possible location, is one more representative or more important than another?
- Will you need to visit multiple sites to understand the range of behavior (such as for participant observation of mortality and morbidity review committees at area hospitals), or are your objectives focused on a single, particular case (social networking at an Antarctic research station)?
- Are there ethical or practical issues with the proposed venue? Are there ways to avoid or mitigate these issues?

As you answer the questions above, remember that your final choice of venue(s) and the number and timing of your visits to the venue(s) will produce participant observation data reflective of that choice. Be sure that your chosen location(s) will meet the sampling requirements implicit in your research objectives and chosen topics of inquiry.

For some smaller scale participant observation studies, it is possible to create venues for participant observations rather than go to the venues where the action naturally occurs. This is sometimes done in commercial research, especially when the behavior naturally occurs only sporadically or unpredictably or at locations that are dispersed, hard to access, or dangerous. For example, a study done some years ago by one of the authors included participant observation of buyers who were considering the purchase of SUV type vehicles. The behavior of interest tends to occur at auto dealerships—locations that are common, physically accessible, and safe and where this sort of shopping activity is fairly frequent. But no dealership would consider the potential loss of a sale that might occur from the presence of participant observers—complete with audio and video recording devices—in the middle of such a lucrative transaction. To gather the needed data, the research team constructed a fake “dealership” setting with an array of SUVs parked as they would be in an auto dealer’s lot. Potential SUV buyers were invited to the location, and these research participants were instructed to act, as closely as possible, to the way they would when examining the vehicles at a real dealership. While this somewhat artificial setting was not ideal for participant observation, the “buyers” did fall quickly into their role and some interesting findings were obtained. The observed behavior, supplemented with semi-structured in-the-moment interviews as these buyers viewed and touched the cars, revealed some important differences in the ways men and women assess this category of vehicles. In particular, women were far more likely than men to assess the ability to reach into the back seat from the driving position—a feature that is important to them as a way of maintaining control over kids and cargo. Men were more likely to take at least one good view of the vehicle from a front, three-quarters position—making sure that the leading edge of the SUV was sufficiently vertical—a characteristic that allows men to refer to their SUVs as “my truck” rather than “my car,” a more appealing image for many males.

There are, of course, substantial potential drawbacks to doing participant observation in a created venue. It is often difficult to recreate some elements of the real venue (the SUV research, for example, did not include the presence of a sleazy salesman backslapping the male buyers or addressing the females as “ma’am”—the research team did not feel this reduced the value of the findings). If you are at a very exploratory stage of the research, you may not know enough about the real venue to emulate it, and your failure to accurately recreate the real venue may totally invalidate your data—people may act so differently that you are doing participant observation in a fantasyland of no interest or value to anyone. In some cases, it

would be unethical to create the venues or situations of interest—no matter how interested we might be in the immediate responses of victims of violent crime, we can't commit crimes in order to learn about them. But in cases where getting into the real venue is not practical and where the created venue can provide an acceptably accurate environment, created venues can be an element in your participant observation tool kit.

## Preparing to Enter the Field

Despite the romantic traditions of intrepid social scientists arriving to do fieldwork with nothing more than natural curiosity and a blank journal, it is advisable to spend some time actually figuring out what you are going to do when you arrive at your participant observation venue(s). This is equally important for short-term, highly focused applied projects and for long-term research efforts such as ethnographies. With short-term projects, lack of good planning creates the risk of not getting the needed data. In long-term efforts, a lack of planning can mean that days or weeks are expended either with basic rapport building or with the researcher gaining lots of information and insight but in such a disorganized fashion that analysis is almost impossible. In these cases, the researcher may find herself having to go over the same ground again and again simply to bring coherence to the findings—a process that can be time consuming, frustrating, and costly. The section below details important considerations as you make your plans to enter the field.

### *Self-Presentation*

In the forthcoming section on ethics and informed consent, we allude to some of the issues surrounding how you present yourself to the others who will be present in your research venue. In addition to raising questions about informed consent, confidentiality, and related matters, your choices about how to present yourself—and to whom—have important consequences about the types of data you can collect, how rapport develops with your research participants, and the limits of your analysis. Table 3.2 below details some of the issues regarding the extent to which other participants are aware of your role.

### *Data Collection Objectives*

For a highly exploratory study at the earliest stages of learning about your research topic, you may meet your data collection objectives by doing little more than just appearing in the venue, hanging out, and asking casual questions. But in many cases, your objectives will be better met by a more planned and systematic approach.

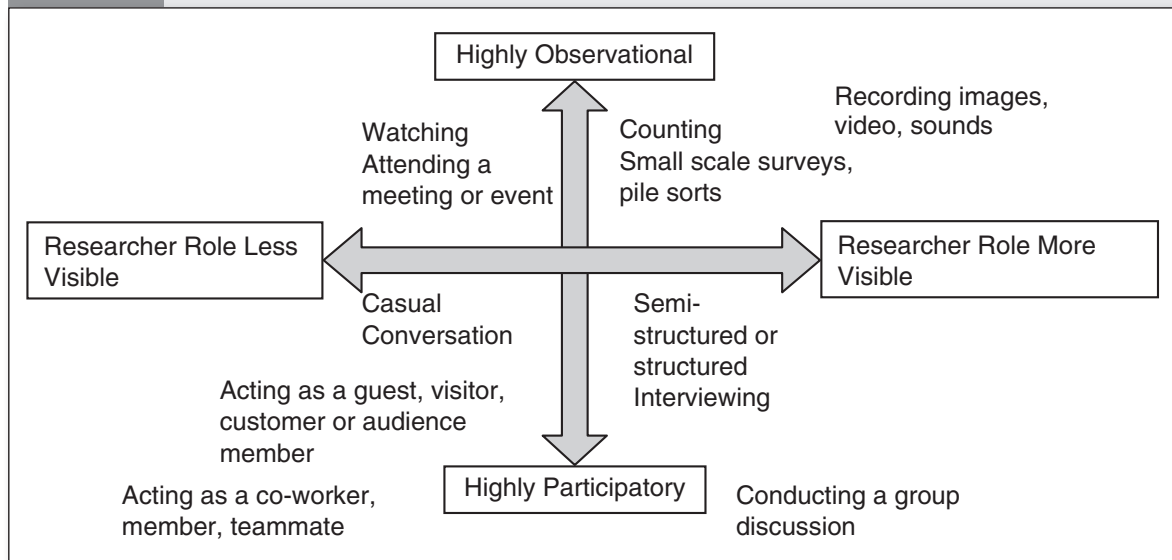
**Table 3.2** Degrees of Self-Revelation in Participant Observation

Degree of self-revelation	Implications
Presenting yourself as an observer–researcher to all participants in the research setting	If all participants know you are a researcher, ethical issues are less problematic, but rapport may take longer to develop. There may be limits on the types of social (inter)action you will be able to observe. In some cases, it may not be possible or practical to inform all the participants in a venue.
Presenting yourself as an observer–researcher to only some participants in the research setting	Informing some participants but not others of your role may be difficult to manage. It can create the risk of being “outed” by knowledgeable participants, or, having participants feel that you were dishonest with them if they learn your role is different than they originally understood. In some environments, there may be a risk of reprisal against the research effort or the researcher. Handling informed consent can be tricky if not all participants are treated the same way.
Presenting yourself as an observer–researcher to none of the participants in the research setting	Staying “incognito” can easily create ethical dilemmas in venues where participants have a reasonable expectation of privacy and confidentiality. In some venues, it may be extremely difficult to stay “in character.” In many venues, useful additional data collection techniques (photos, audio and/or video recordings, free lists and pile sorts, and many others) cannot be done without revealing the research role.

Thinking in advance about the types of activities you will participate in at your field site will enable you to maximize your data collection. In Figure 3.1 are some common participant observation activities arranged along a two-axis grid in which the x-axis is the degree of participation relative to the degree of observation, while the y-axis is the degree of revelation or concealment of the researcher role.

It should be obvious that different types of data will be available depending on what role(s) you play. It should be equally obvious that some roles require knowledge, skill, or physical capability. For George Plimpton (1966) to write his famous book *Paper Lion*, he had to be capable of participating as a trainee in a National Football League (NFL) training camp—a form of participant observation that would be outside of many researchers’ comfort zones. In addition to physical and mental preparation, you may also need to plan for moral issues that can arise in the field. If you are studying groups that engage in socially disapproved or criminal activity, then you should have a clear sense, in advance, of what you will or will not be comfortable

Figure 3.1 Participant Observation Continuums



observing or participating in—and should adjust your informed consent and introduction to the field site accordingly.

### Entering the Observation Venue

Once your planning is complete, you can enter your participant observation venue. This may be as simple as just driving to your selected location and walking in, or you may spend weeks or months getting permissions, invitations, visas, or safe passage into a challenging or restricted research environment. Once you have found a way to get to your venue (and the funds and the physical and mental resources to collect data and, for a long-term study, to survive there comfortably), you need to make an effective entry into your fieldwork site. While stories of botched arrivals in the field are a staple of cocktail party conversation among field researchers, they are no fun when they are actually happening. Many projects have been severely limited by poor entry into the field site, and some venues have had to be abandoned altogether after the research effort went so awry that no meaningful data could be collected or even because the researcher(s) was in danger. Table 3.3 lists some of the areas of potential pitfalls in entering the field.

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Discussion</b>
<b>Self-introductions</b>	Have a version of your self-introduction that is truthful, concise, and understandable in local terms and that does not set off alarms or cause offense among the people you are approaching. If possible, learn something about the local norms in advance, get someone to introduce you, or hang back and observe a bit until you know the rules.
<b>Who you will approach and who approaches you</b>	In some venues, an outsider is more likely to be approached by marginal members of the group than by more centrally placed individuals. In Japan, for example, Mitchell found that members of the <i>yakuza</i> (organized crime families) are often quite willing to talk to foreigners. But being seen with a <i>yakuza</i> can wreck your chances of talking to more respectable members of Japanese society. In societies with strict social classes, it may be very difficult to move outside of the class where you first enter. Be careful about becoming attached to or dependent on the first “insider” who welcomes you.
<b>How you handle problems/challenges</b>	In almost any field setting, sooner or later, something will go wrong—loss of data, discovering that you have been lied to or misled, practical jokes or pranks, thefts, personal disputes. Be prepared to handle these in a way that allows you to continue your work. In general, your response should match that of locals who face the same challenges. Do not fly off the handle if you are in a high-tolerance, high-forgiveness culture. Similarly, do not be a wimp in a venue where people are expected to stand up for themselves and respond vigorously when they are wronged.
<b>Personal style</b>	Consider what aspects of your personal style will facilitate your data collection and which might get in your way. Think how you will take advantage of your strengths (i.e., empathy, good humor, the ability to drink others under the table) or suppress your weaknesses (low frustration level, impatience, overactive fear response). Think seriously about who you are and how you will be in a particular venue. If you are the type who melts into tears at the thought of children suffering, participant observation in a pediatric oncology ward may not be for you.

If your study is one that has a big community involvement aspect, as is common in international development or community improvement projects, you must be careful to learn who the relevant stakeholders are and plan how you will make contact with them. The buy-in of stakeholders is an important part of these projects, and



you need their goodwill to conduct your project successfully. Additionally, their insights, social networks, and insider knowledge can be extremely valuable in helping to make sure that your data collection and analysis are as comprehensive and valuable as possible. Depending on your research venue and the type of project the study is part of, the stakeholder groups you consider may include various types of social and political leaders, political parties, heads of clans or tribes, members of various social strata, elders, members of both sexes, members of various age cohorts, and those with specialized knowledge or interests (economic, social, or otherwise) in your research topic.

If your preparations have been successful, then you should be able to enter your field site comfortably (both physically and socially), effectively, and safely. Allow time to build rapport with your participants. In most cases, it is better to gradually build from a mostly observer role toward more active participation. Do not be overly anxious to instantly and precisely address your research objectives or to steer naturally occurring conversations toward your research objectives. The point of participant observation is to learn in context, and to do that you need to immerse yourself in the place, people, and action of your research location. Keep your objectives in mind, but have patience. If you have chosen a meaningful topic for your research, picked an appropriate location, and are prepared to watch and learn, you can have confidence that the insights you are seeking will emerge.

## What to Observe

The list of things you might observe during participant observation is extremely varied and is limited only by your research objectives and your imagination. That said, there are some broad categories that are commonly observed, as detailed in the Table 3.4.

Category	Includes	Researchers should note
Appearance	Clothing, age, gender, physical appearance	Anything that might indicate membership in groups or in subpopulations of interest to the study, such as profession, social status, socioeconomic class, religion, or ethnicity

(Continued)

Category	Includes	Researchers should note
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, profession
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 people's behaviors indicate about their feelings toward one another, their social rank, or their profession
Personal space	How close people stand to one another	What people's preferences concerning personal space suggest about their relationships
Human traffic	How and how many people 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
People who stand out	Identification of people who receive a lot of attention from others	These people's characteristics, 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 Note that these individuals could be good people to approach for an informal interview or to serve as key informants

Source: Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, and Namey (2005, p. 20).

While the table above lists some of the categories of observations you might make, it does not indicate what the data from these observations might actually look like. The flexibility of participant observation means that you have lots of leeway about how to actually record what happens during your research and that it can be as structured or unstructured as you wish. The degree of structure should align with your research objectives and the stage of learning the research is intended to illuminate—less structure is necessary for broad, exploratory, and early stage research and more structure for focused, applied studies that are intended to provide additional depth, new perspectives, or confirmation on topics where a lot is already known. That said, having some structure can greatly facilitate data collection and analysis. Table 3.5 lists some of the most common types of data collected during participant observation and the advantages and disadvantages of each.

**Table 3.5** Types of Data Collection in Participant Observation

Data Type	Description	Pros and Cons
Observation Notes/ audio/video	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The baseline for participant observation, notes, and recordings</li> <li>• Written/transcribed/digital record of what the researcher saw, heard, or felt during the observation period</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very open to emergent data, little/no instrument bias</li> <li>• Can be difficult to capture in some venues, time consuming to analyze, subject to the bias of the researcher regarding what to note or record</li> </ul>
Casual conversations/ informal interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Notes or recordings of actual conversations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Captures data in the vernacular and in context</li> <li>• May not be relevant to research objectives, can be hard to accurately record in some settings</li> <li>• May be highly idiosyncratic and difficult to analyze</li> </ul>
Semistructured or structured interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviews conducted using an interview guide</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides data relevant to the research objectives</li> <li>• Takes the encounter into a “research” mode that decreases some aspects of the natural context</li> </ul>
Counts of specific observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counts of the frequency/intensity/source of specific behaviors of interest—usually collected with the aid of a template listing the types of things to be counted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides data that can be used to identify norms or make comparisons between events/times/individuals, and so on.</li> <li>• Requires the development of a data collection instrument and the ability to accurately record the behavior of interest in the field setting</li> </ul>
Process flows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visual or verbal records of common processes—often laid out in a flow chart or stepwise diagram</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excellent for understanding sequenced events (work flows, manufacturing processes, decision processes)</li> <li>• Can be challenging to capture</li> <li>• Danger of capturing an idiosyncratic version</li> </ul>
Lists and categories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lists of items, categories, and inclusion/exclusion rules</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide both list content and cultural meaning</li> <li>• Can be tedious to collect and may be difficult to extract “rules”</li> </ul>

As mentioned above, having some degree of structure can facilitate data collection and structure can take myriad forms. On the following page are examples of five of the more common types of data collection aids that can help structure participant observation data collection.

1. *A general list of topics to be discussed or the types of things to be observed.* The example below shows a list that was used for a study of women who were high-frequency clothing shoppers. The participant observation portion of the study followed women through live shopping expeditions and used video recordings and casual questioning.
  1. What triggers the shopping? What need(s) is the shopper trying to fulfill?
  2. What stores are visited?
  3. What happens at each store (capture activity, duration, frequency, emotional valence, interactions with sales staff and other shoppers)?
  4. What interactions occur with the merchandise (viewing items on the rack/shelf, trying on, price comparisons, purchasing)?
  5. What is the aftermath of the shopping? Needs fulfilled? Emotional valence?
2. *A fill-in the blank template.* Figure 3.2 below below was used by Human Terrain Teams in Iraq and Afghanistan to make quick sociocultural assessments of communities visited by U.S. ground troops.
3. *A reporting summary template* can be used to summarize the key points from lengthy, free-flowing notes/recordings/transcripts. The example below is from a series of participant observations of enrollment visits made by potential vocational school students to a school they were considering.

**Date and School:** 10/8/09 - Long Beach

**Program Considered:** Massage Tech

**Classroom visit:** yes

**Interaction with instructors:** yes

**Financial aid briefing:** yes

**Stated interest in enrolling:** uncertain

**Parent/guardian involved:** no

**Planned follow-up contact:** yes, admissions rep to phone

**Notes/Comments:** prospect seemed overwhelmed/impressed by school, worried about cost relative to employment prospects in field. Excited about hands-on learning approach.

4. *A process model template* helps lay out sequenced or stepwise processes and decision pathways. Figure 3.3 on page 97 below is for a study focused on real-estate sales in a part of Baghdad. The goal of this study was to find out how extortion of buyers and sellers worked to funnel money into terrorist operations.
5. *A map*, accompanied by instructions on what to include, can be helpful in venues where the physical context is important to the observed action. Figure 3.4 on page 98 below is from a village level study involving economic and subsistence activities.

**Figure 3.2** Village Assessment Form

**Date:**

**Geographic Information**

Province:                      District:                      Village:

MGRS:                      Latitude:                      Longitude:

Notes/Comments:

**Demography**

Est. Population:

Est. Number of Houses:

Avg. Family Size:

Ethnic Groups:

Tribes Present:

Notes/Comments:

**Infrastructure & Services**

Education:

Health:

Water Sources:

Type of Irrigation:

Government:

Electricity:

Communication:

Transportation:

Other Services & Infrastructure:

Infrastructure & Services Shared with Other Villages (schools, wells, clinics, etc.):

Notes/Comments:

*(Continued)*

**Figure 3.2** (Village Assessment Form, Continued)

**Landscape**

General Description of Terrain:

Transportation Access to Village:

Connections to Other Villages (roads, wadis, passes, etc.):

Travel Time to Nearest Bazaar:

Travel Time to Nearest Clinic:

Travel Time to Nearest City:

Notes/Comments:

**Economy**

Shops:

Nearest Bazaar:

Main Sources of Income:

Industry:

Crops:

Livestock:

Threats to Local Economy:

Notes/Comments:

**Government & Leadership**

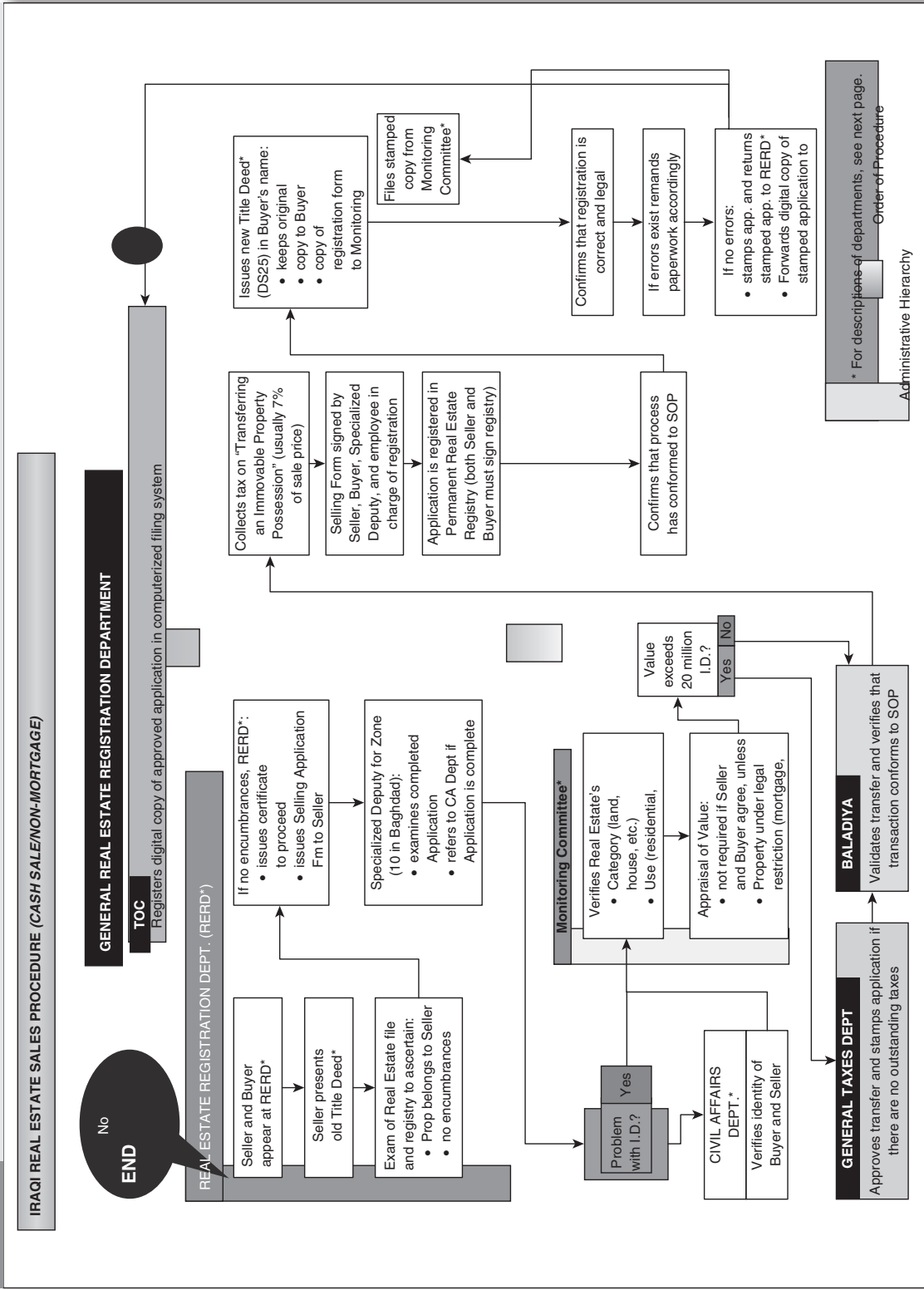
Elders:

Religious Officials:

Other Influential People:

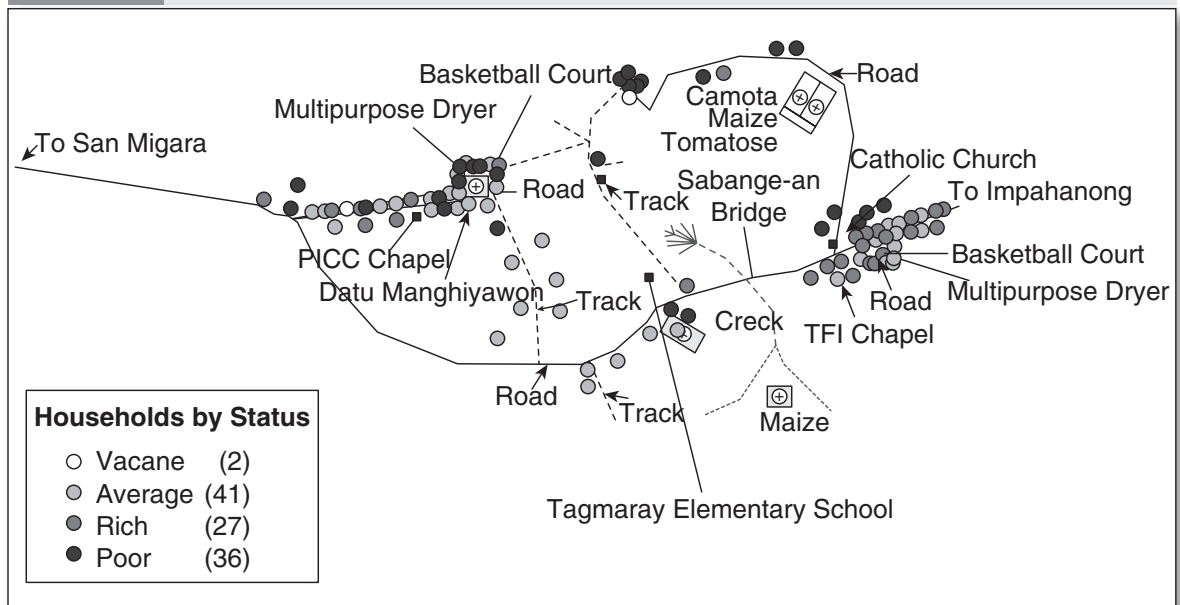
Notes/Comments:

Figure 3.3 Iraq Real Estate Sales Procedure Map



Source: U.S. Army.

Figure 3.4 Social Map



Source: Crumb and Purcell (2001).

## Organizing Data

In many ways, organizing data from participant observation is similar to data organization for other types of qualitative research. The general principles and techniques are laid out in Chapter 7 of this book and will not be repeated here. There are, however, some special challenges to data organization that are inherent to participant observation. These are challenges presented by the field setting and the sheer volume of data that participant observation can produce.

In many participant observation settings, there will be limits on your ability to record your observations right at the moment they happen. This may be due to the physical setting (it is hard to take notes or operate a recording device while standing up outdoors during a rainstorm), the social setting (taking notes during a conversation slows it down and moves it from casual chat to formal interview), the need to maintain some secrecy about your role (if you suddenly start video-taping at your workplace, people may suspect you have an agenda other than earning a paycheck), or simply because the task you are participating in requires both hands (if you are helping to haul in a fishing net, you can't let go of it to jot down notes). The most standard approach to these challenges is to jot



what notes you can, as soon as possible after the events, and then expand these notes at the earliest opportunity. For example, when a colleague of the authors conducted participant observation at a salmon fishing camp while working as a boat carpenter, he kept a small notepad in his overalls and would jot notes about camp activities and interactions whenever he was momentarily alone. Each night he would then expand these notes into as full a record as possible. The key is to minimize the loss of data due to the recall limits of human memory. Table 3.6 lists tips for field note taking, including the use of electronic note-taking aids.

**Table 3.6** Note-Taking Tips for the Field

**Field Note and Documentation Tips**

**Capture it quickly**—the sooner you write down your observations, the more complete and accurate they will be.

**Expand your notes as soon as possible**—use the first possible opportunity to expand your notes into a full record; do not count on being able to remember “all the important stuff”—memory is fragile. In expanding your notes, fill in the complete story of *what* you observed first, before adding in interpretations or *what you think about what you observed*. The notes should provide a detailed record of “the facts,” as well as your own commentary and developing understanding of those facts.

**Use recording devices and assistants**—in many cases, you do not have to do everything yourself. Modern digital photo/video/audio recorders, recording capabilities built into phones, and specialized note-taking devices, such as Livescribe (a combined pen–digital audio recorder that is excellent for field notes), can be used in many participant observation venues. If you are working in a team, having one person act as the note taker can help spread this burden and improve overall recall of observations.

**Use time and labor saving tricks**—develop shorthand for names/events/ideas that appear frequently in your observations. Develop and use forms and templates to streamline data capture for key topics.

**Stay organized**—Chapter 7 discusses data management. The sheer volume of data generated during participant observation makes this especially critical. The time you spend organizing your data as you collect them will be rewarded during data analysis. A little effort up front prevents a lot of frustration and wasted time at the next stage of the project.

## How Long to Stay

As with any other field-based data collection method, the rule of thumb about participant observation is that you should stay long enough to get the data you need. In the case of large scale projects aimed at describing complex social scenes or entire

cultures, this could be a matter of months or years. In these settings, it may take weeks or months to be fully accepted by your research participants, and in many cases, this is a gradual process. Typically, researchers conducting these long-term studies gradually become more of a participant and less of an observer as time goes by, moving through degrees of intimacy with others who are in the scene and at each stage, discovering new layers of insight and information.

Smaller, more focused projects, especially those where the topic of the participant observation is very specific and the general elements of the venue and behavior are already well-known, will not require such extended time frames. Workplace participant observation studies can often be completed in weeks or months rather than years, and commercial projects that hone in on narrow aspects of consumer behavior may have participant observation elements that last only a few days.

In the field of international development, it is common to use some form of participant observation as part of a rapid assessment study. In these settings, participant observation may be conducted on a very short time frame and will overlap with other forms of data collection. Most rapid assessment projects are completed in time frames ranging from a few weeks to a few months, with participant observation conducted for an even shorter period during this time.

### Exiting the Venue

The longer time lines and personal interactions that are part of some participant observation studies mean that you may also need to give more consideration to how you leave your research venue(s) than might be necessary for other types of data collection. Friendships and collaborative relationships may develop that need to be respected as the research concludes. In some cases, the researcher may never fully

#### Before you leave . . .

**Revisit your informed consent protocols**—is there anyone whose consent is needed or is needed to a different degree than was true at the start of the research? As you begin to think about analysis and publication of your findings, be sure that all your consents and the records of them are in order.

**Make sure your data are complete, organized, and backed up**—the field site is the only place where raw data can be collected and the only place where you can effectively address gaps or recreate lost information.

**Thank those who have helped you**—recognizing those who assisted you is both polite and paves the way for researchers who might follow you.

**Create a contact file**—during data analysis you may need to recontact some of your research participants, or you may wish to share the research outcomes and outputs with them. Make sure the contact information you need is complete and up to date.

leave the venue, maintaining personal connections that last for years after formal data collection has concluded. The box below outlines some areas to consider as you depart your participant observation venue.

## ETHICAL AND PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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While Chapter 8 provides general guidelines on how to handle informed consent and research ethics in qualitative studies, the highly contextual nature of participant observation can present special ethical challenges to the researcher. The section that follows details the ethical and practical considerations that are unique to participant observation and provides solutions to the issues they present.

### Informed Consent and Ethics in Participant Observation

For many smaller scale, short-term participant observation studies, especially those done for commercial or applied purposes, you may be able to follow the same informed consent procedures you would use for an in-depth interview or focus group. In these cases, you can provide all those who will be part of the scene to be observed with the needed information about their rights and responsibilities as a participant, answer their questions, and obtain a written or verbal record of their consent. This approach works well when the scope of the observation scene is limited in terms of the number of people involved, the size of the physical environment, and the duration of the study. For example, one of the authors conducted a participant observation study for the California Avocado Board in which consumers and chefs prepared their favorite avocado-based dishes in their own home or restaurant kitchens. In this case, only a small number of people were at each site—the participants and their family members or kitchen staffs—and everyone who was likely to be observed could be briefed and could give their informed consent.

But many participant observation venues are much more complex socially or physically. In a public or semi-public setting—an airport, a bar, a work site, a shopping mall, a video arcade, a village plaza, a store, a holiday celebration, a political rally, a playground, an online chat room—there could be anywhere from dozens to thousands of people on the scene, some there for extended periods and others only transiently. In these cases, it is often not practical, or would be simply impossible, to gain consent from all those with whom you might interact, let alone all those you might observe. Additionally, in some studies there might be multiple participant observation events spread out over a period of weeks or months, with different combinations of people at the location each time—turning traditional informed consent procedures into a logistical nightmare. When informed consent cannot practically be obtained, it is up to the researcher to conduct the participant observation in a way that still

protects the rights of those being observed. Ask yourself the three key questions below to help make sure your participant observation is conducted ethically and respectfully toward all who are involved in it.

*How public or private is the venue?*

If the observed action is taking place in a truly public setting—a park, a political rally, or such—there is generally no expectation that what is said and done there, at least in terms of the primary action, will be private. As long as the observations you make are at the level of public behavior—public speech, the movements of people through the space and time of the event—you are generally free to collect data both via observation and interaction with the other participants, without gaining individual informed consent. Be aware, however, that some behavior that takes place in public settings may still carry an expectation of at least partial privacy. For example, participant observation of teenagers' activities in a shopping mall might include observation of how they utilize mall space, the amount of time they spend in each store, the food court, and just walking around—all very public behaviors with no expectation of privacy. But it might also include overhearing or even being part of their conversations about drug use, sexual behavior, bullying, or petty crimes—issues they might expect you to treat confidentially. It is your responsibility to recognize and respect the boundary between public and private behavior and speech—even in a public setting—and to adjust your informed consent procedures to get permission if your data collection and/or analysis shifts toward the privacy realm. Remember, it is not permissible to audio or video record any activity or conversation where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy without the consent of the participants. In many U.S. states, this is also subject to legal ramifications. If you are in doubt, get explicit permission before you record.

Online venues, such as chat rooms, also create challenges in terms of informed consent. Typically, conversations in the main areas of these online forums would be considered a public space with no expectation of privacy. But many online conversations include some private conversations that are not visible to the rest of the participants and where the expectation of at least some degree of privacy is clearly present. In these cases, the researcher may need to reveal her role in order to avoid an ethical violation.

*What kind of data will you be collecting, and how will you analyze it?*

Social interactions range from those that present very little potential for ethical concern to those that are inherently apt to raise ethical challenges. To return to our example of teenagers at a mall, few teen girls would be concerned about having a participant observer shadow and interview them about how they shop for, select, and

purchase clothing. The same girls (and their parents) might have a far different view of participant observation in the same venue if the data collection focused on their conversations about boys and dating. Similarly, if the data collected are analyzed at a general level, that is, “Girl X spent 15 minutes discussing male-female relationship problems,” most participants would have few privacy concerns and an ethical violation is unlikely. In contrast, a detailed personal narrative appearing in a published work—“Girl X described how her current boyfriend Y had pressured her for sex until she finally relented,” requires a more formal approach to informed consent, even if the participants’ names and towns are omitted.

### *How are you presenting yourself?*

If you are making your role as a researcher clear to others in the participant observation venue, their observable behavior and interactions with you can often be considered to fall into the implied consent arena. This is the case with an anthropologist living in a native village—the anthropologist describes her role at the point of initial introductions, her actions as an interviewer-recorder-observer are openly visible, and it is assumed that from that moment forward everyone knows that she is collecting information about the local culture and way of life as she engages in the village’s day-to-day activities and talks to its inhabitants.

At the other extreme are participant observation studies in which the researcher does not reveal her or his research agenda—for example, posing as a customer in a store, a co-worker in a factory, or a potential member of a political or social organization. (Not all writers on the subject consider these to be participant observation; Bernard, for example, classifies this role as “true participants.”) These cases can pose genuine ethical dilemmas, since a certain degree of deception is built into the data collection protocol.

Some ethicists argue that research that requires deception simply shouldn’t be done, whereas others point to the value of data that could not be collected without it. But most of us are somewhere in the middle, feeling that some studies warrant keeping at least some of the participants with whom we interact in the dark about our researcher role. In commercial research, the entire *mystery shopper* industry depends on participant observers playing the role of customers while collecting a wide range of data about retailers, restaurants, and service providers, and for the most part, no one questions the ethics of the firms engaged in mystery shopping, the researchers they hire, or the clients they serve. On a less commercial and more thought-provoking level, Barbara Erhenrich’s (2001) famous participant observation study of low-wage workers, *Nickel and Dimed*, could not have been conducted if many of her co-workers, employers, and customers had known she intended to write a book about her experiences (some did know, but many did not). *Nickel and Dimed* is widely considered to

be an important portrait of low-wage labor in contemporary America, and few have challenged Erhenrich's deception of those she encountered in the course of collecting her data. In contrast, controversy about the deception of other participants has surrounded Brooke Magnanti's (2005) description of prostitution, in which she worked as a London call girl and had paid sex with male customers—a venue in which it is safe to assume that many of the other participants would not have agreed to be part of a published work.

In answering the three questions above, you should be able to match the formality of your informed consent procedures to the needs of your study and respectful guardianship of the rights of your research participants. Remember that you, as the researcher, are the one specifically charged with making sure your study is conducted in an ethical manner. Participant observation studies raise unique opportunities for insight but also unique challenges to research ethics. Be sure that as you design your research protocols, you have fully considered the ethical ramifications of your work and that you have taken every step necessary to gather your data ethically.

## Researcher Safety

Because it is often conducted at sites that are not fully under the control of the research team, participant observation can put the researcher in greater danger than would be encountered using other qualitative data collection techniques, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups. There are two main sources of risk to researcher safety in participant observation studies—risks posed by the venue and risks posed by those being observed.

### *Venue-Related Risks*

Most researchers will be aware that some participant observation settings are inherently riskier than others. High-crime areas, corrupt bureaucracies, dangerous workplaces, ill-maintained vehicles, questionable roads, scenes of diseases and injuries, locations where illicit activity is conducted, and places where political oppression is occurring are just a few of the potentially risky venues that researchers have encountered during participant observation. And the participant observation does not have to be actually in a high-risk zone—high-risk adjacent is often enough to cause a problem. One of the authors, for example, once got teargassed while in the Indian *mercado* in Quito, Ecuador. The police were breaking up a student protest some distance from the *mercado* and, having extra tear gas on hand, apparently decided it would be amusing to teargas the marketplace—even though the Indians were not involved in the protest. Accordingly, the author's observations

of the market swiftly turned into a participant observation of a crowd stampeding through the narrow cobblestone streets.

### *Participant-Related Risks*

In some cases, the presence of the researcher or the researcher's data collection efforts may trigger a negative response from some of the people being observed. Sometimes this is caused by participants who assume the researcher is something else—a spy for a local or foreign government, a stoolie reporting to the boss or warden, a member of a rival gang, a policeman, a potential child snatcher, or someone from the political opposition. At other times, the negative response may be with full knowledge of the researcher's intention and role and simply be an expression of someone's dislike of being "a guinea pig" for your study, or, someone who fears that your findings will portray them in an unflattering light. In either event, people who take exception to your presence and your activities can pose real dangers ranging from expulsion from the research environment to injury or even death.

### *Mitigating Safety Risks*

Common sense and good planning are the best ways to protect yourself from the potential risks of participant observation. Assess the venues you will be in and learn what threats they might contain, human and otherwise. Do your best to make sure that your activities do not expose you, your research team, or your research participants to undue risks. If the environment is inherently dangerous, learn what local people do to lessen the threats and, if practical, do the same. Be aware that your presence may change the social dynamic and introduce new risks to a previously stable environment. Watch how others respond to you and around you. If you see that tensions are high, try to learn if you are the cause and what you can do to help things return to normal. Do a good job of your informed consent activities—make sure your explanation of your work is understandable and credible in local terms. Be especially cautious if you are working in a risky venue without explaining your role to other participants. Give long and full consideration to what might happen if you are "found out."

When selecting venues for participant observation, include risk assessment as part of your selection criteria. A risk assessment should include the following:

- Making a list of the reasonably foreseeable or likely sources of physical or social danger to the researcher(s) and any increased risks the research activity might create for the other participants
- Identifying ways of avoiding or mitigating any significant risks such as limiting the times of day of the participant observation to the least risky periods,

working in teams, hiring your own transport instead of relying on public or local sources, informing people of your whereabouts during data collection, making sure that communication with other team members, police, and other resources is available during the data collection, taking preventive measures to avoid injuries or exposure to disease, and having first aid on hand

- Assessing the overall risk to benefit ratio—making a realistic judgment of the value of the data you plan to collect in relation to the risks associated with collecting these—if the risks are disproportionate to the value, consider eliminating the venue in favor of a safer one, using a less risky approach or, in the worst case, abandoning the line of inquiry altogether

## Legal Issues and Constraints

As you might expect, conducting participant observation can occasionally lead researchers into murky legal waters, especially in litigation-oriented societies, such as the United States. Researchers in the United States have been involved in a number of civil suits and criminal charges involving claims of invasion of privacy, libel and slander, theft of trade secrets or intellectual property, trespassing, and other claim types. Sometimes, these cases involve people who were only peripheral players in the research venue or who were not actually part of the research at all. When one of the authors was employed by Nissan North America in the early 1990s, a Southern California couple accused Nissan North America (NNA is the holding company for all of Nissan's operations in the United States and Canada) of invading their privacy. They had hosted a young Nissan researcher visiting from Japan who had arranged to live with them as a home-stay boarder during his internship at NNA's headquarters in Torrance, California. Shortly after he returned to Japan, the couple saw a published news story with Nissan researchers that mentioned doing participant observation of U.S. consumers at their homes and workplaces. They accused Nissan of having planted a spy in their home in order to conduct research without their knowledge and brought suit. Although the suit was soon dismissed by a judge, the publicity that surrounded the case was embarrassing to Nissan, hurtful to the young Japanese intern (who had believed he had a good relationship with his U.S. hosts), and made the company's research team extremely cautious about both home stays for interns and the communication of research findings.

Since, at least in the United States, anyone is entitled to sue anyone, at any time, for just about anything, there is no easy way to avoid all risk of legal complications when conducting participant observation. But a few rules of thumb can help researchers avoid legal pitfalls and stay within the boundaries of the law:



1. Know the law involving the types of activities you will be observing and/or participating in. If your research venue is a place where unlawful activity may occur, then do some research about the relevant law. For some types of crimes, an observer is not considered to be part of the criminal activity. For others, observing or even hearing about the crime after the fact and failing to report it makes you an accessory. Similarly, if you are working with a business, know what constitutes a trade secret. If you are working with individuals, households or social groups, know what makes an invasion of privacy, or a libelous, slanderous statement. Do not wait until you have already crossed the line into criminal or litigational territory to learn where the border lies.
2. Have a plan for dealing with sticky legal situations. Know what you are going to do if you observe or hear about criminal behavior during your participant observations. If possible (and safe!) inform others in the venue of your intentions. Whether you plan to keep your mouth shut, remove yourself from the scene during these moments, or run to the police, your safety and your freedom from criminal charges depend on having a good plan and being able to carry it out. And while the consequences in civil suits are usually less dire than in criminal law, the same principles apply. Know the risks, know the relevant law, treat confidential material appropriately, keep good records (often the best way to show you did nothing wrong), and don't wait until someone hands you a summons to decide what to do.
3. When in doubt, consult with an expert. Most researchers experience any legal consultation as an exercise in hearing all the ways every type of social research is a minefield of risks. Indeed, one of the authors once was asked by corporate lawyers to caveat data that showed that drivers of a certain make of car were less likely to wear seat belts than drivers of some other vehicles—an actual fact available in government statistics—to lessen the risk that someone seeing the data would interpret them as the car maker somehow encouraging its customers to drive without seatbelts. Nevertheless, if your research may take you into the fringes of criminal or civil law, there is no substitute for expert advice about the risks involved and ways to mitigate them. A consultation with an attorney in the relevant legal specialty can provide both ways to lessen legal risks and the comforting assurance that today's participant observation is not going lead to tomorrow's mug shot in the local newspaper. For researchers subject to institutional review board (IRB) approval, one of the things the IRB should do is to help identify and mitigate possible legal risks.

## PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION IN INTERNATIONAL SETTINGS

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Anyone who has even been a tourist in a foreign land has, in an informal way, been a participant observer. Many of us have delighted in the excitement of absorbing the human and nonhuman elements of a new environment and struggled with the mental exhaustion and occasional social disasters that come from trying to process an overwhelming stream of data. These joys and challenges are even more apparent when you attempt to conduct participant observation in an international setting.

The three most obvious international issues for participant observation are limits on how much of a participant the researcher can become, issues of language and translation, and the risk of a research failure due to poor interaction at the data collection stage or misinterpretation of the data during analysis.

### Dealing With Social Limits

In many settings, there are significant restraints regarding how much of a participant you can become. Virtually all societies reserve certain roles for those who meet specific demographic and/or social criteria—sex and age; clan, tribe, and family membership; and particular skills or credentials—that may place constraints on the degree to which a particular researcher can embed in a particular setting. Being a foreigner can hugely increase and complicate these constraints. To do successful participant observation outside your own country, you must review every step in your preparations, choice of venue, and intended research approach with an eye to where and in what ways your lack of local origins may get in your way. In many cases, you can mediate the effects of your foreign origins—improving your language and cultural preparation before you enter the venue, spending more time building rapport and becoming acculturated, finding local guides and mentors to teach or sponsor you. But be realistic—there may be some areas or activities where you will never be welcome or able to participate. That doesn't mean you can't learn about these things—only that you may have to rely on data collection techniques other than participant observation.

That said, there are many international settings in which being from another country has little negative impact or even has a positive effect on participant observation. In many community and work settings, being a sympathetic listener or an extra set of hands can more than make up for being foreign. A colleague of the authors performed a very successful participant observation project on a construction crew in Afghanistan, despite being American and having only a basic command of the local

language. His co-workers were happy to have an extra laborer and enjoyed telling him about their lives and answering his questions. The key to dealing with the issues surrounding being a foreigner is to use the strengths of being this type of outsider, mitigate the weaknesses of this role, and to be honest about the limits it may impose on your data.

## Dealing With Linguistic and Cultural Translation Issues

Similar to the limits imposed by being foreign, a lack of fluency in the local language can constrain the effectiveness of participant observation data collection and analysis. Obviously, the greater your cultural and linguistic fluency, the more opportunities you will have for observation and participation. In many international settings, you need at least basic language fluency—or the ability to hire a good local interpreter—to move from being a pure observer to being more of a participant. Typically, there will be some activities and events that you can participate in and understand with only a limited linguistic capability and others that will be effectively off limits until your language skills are at a higher level. Similarly, you must have at least some cultural knowledge—social norms of dress, behavior, speech—to function socially among your chosen research participants.

While it is possible to use translators and interpreters, be careful about the effects of these activities on the data you are trying to collect. The conversational lag time created by waiting for the interpreter can interrupt the natural flow of the action you are trying to observe or cause speakers to be more thoughtful, brief, or cautious than normal. Additionally, the quality and accuracy of the translation or interpretation will have a direct effect on your data. If you use translators, interpreters, or local experts to help you analyze your data, their work will also become a feature of the data themselves. As with any other facet of your data collection environment, be aware of how the use of interpreters and translators may create biases and limits on the data you will analyze, and do what you can to make sure that you minimize any downside represented by your lack of cultural and linguistic fluency.

## SUMMING UP

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The deeply contextual insights and flexibility of participant observation make it a powerful source of qualitative insight. The density of data produced and the intensity of the data collection experiences it entails can produce meaning on both a professional and personal level that few other approaches can rival. While it can be time and labor intensive, participant observation is an important addition to any qualitative researcher's tool kit.

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## EXERCISES

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1. Choose an accessible social or cultural venue or event that is not familiar to you—a gathering place of a religious, ethnic, and/or cultural group outside your own, a social or community gathering that you would not normally attend, an event held by those of different heritage, interest, or values from yours. The more unfamiliar to you, the better. Go to the location and do a purely visual observation—note who is there (demographically); note signs of social differences (deference, use of space, identifying clothing, badges, etc.) and watch how people interact with one another. Note what parts of the scene are easy to understand and which parts are confusing to you as an outside observer. What sorts of additional data—interviews, secondary sources, or additional observation—would you need to conduct to get clarity on these issues?
2. List several potential participant research venues. In which of these would you make your research role known to all of the participants?
3. Choose a social scene that is familiar to you but that is not familiar to most others, such as an unusual hobby, job, or sport; an ethnic celebration that is not widely known among outsiders; or a localized event or tradition. What aspects of this scene would be hard for outsiders to understand? What behaviors distinguish insiders from outsiders? What would a participant observer have to know or learn in order for you to consider them to be a participant?
4. Choose a place, event, social gathering, or work setting that is highly familiar to you—one in which you have insider status and full membership. As one operating from the “complete participant” level (Spradley, 1980), try to observe with “fresh eyes” as a means for making the familiar “strange.” What do you notice about how people interact with one another? Note signs of social differences and power differentials (e.g., How are people grouped together? Who is doing most of the talking? Who is listened to most?). Note patterns of discourse and conversational topics, behaviors, and norms.
5. Pick a section of a foreign film in a language you do not speak. Choose a part of the film that has a high degree of human interaction. Watch 5 to 10 minutes of the movie with the sound muted. Try taking notes about what you are seeing. What aspects of the action were clear to you? What aspects were confusing? Watch again with the sound on. What becomes clearer? What remains confusing?

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If you were an actual participant observer in this scene, what sort of assistance might you need in terms of both linguistic and cultural interpretation?

6. If you speak a second language (even at a basic level), think what sorts of scenes and activities you could and couldn't act as a full participant observer in using that language. List at least five interesting social settings for which your current level of fluency would be adequate for good participant observation. List at least five for which your current level of fluency would place limits on what you could do and observe. What are some ways you could deal with these limits?