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Objectives	This module introduces the issues involved in research using observation technique. It discusses the established procedures of observation which enhance the validity of the findings of the researcher. It also provides insights into the types of observation and ethics of collecting data using observation.
Keywords	Observation, participant observation, direct observation, ethics of observation

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Sociology

Name of Paper: Methodology of Research in Sociology

Name of Module: Observation

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1. Introduction

In social science research the term observation became coterminous with qualitative research. It has become central defining technique of research in Sociology and Anthropology. It is also an important fact to note that the term observation is understood for intense long duration field work. In other words it stands for an in-depth understanding of the particular social setting studied.

2. Observation

Emergence of observation as a technique of data collection in Sociology and Anthropology research is rooted in the debate on methods of social science. The debate witnessed between those who attempted to apply empiricist-positivist methods of natural science in understanding social phenomena and those who opposed such attempts. Opponents to equating social phenomena with that of natural phenomena contend that social action is dynamic and social actors don't just react but create, alter, and recreate social situations. Thus the latter argue for evolving a methodology for understanding the dynamic nature of social in human interactions. One of the key outcomes of such debate is the emergence of phenomenological method which privileges actors' point of view in the research process. The epistemological basis of observation is, understanding social action in its naturally occurring situation. Principle of interaction between social actors is central to the researcher's agenda. From these origins emerged the method of observation which is the most widely used method in Sociology and Anthropology. What began with observing simple societies by Anthropologists, over a period, the scope of observation widened to urban, complex formal organizational spheres as well.

3. Meaning and its relevance in social research

All research, whether in natural sciences or social sciences, involves observation. It has been used as a scientific method in arriving at meaningful inferences on the observed, whether natural or social phenomena. However, data collection using observation method is not as simple as it appears to be. Observation of natural or social phenomena without following standardized procedures and established practices cannot be considered as valid for drawing inferences. Even if one attempts to draw, it has to stand the test of validity. To overcome the problems with the veracity of the findings of observation researchers adopt certain procedures which have been standardized to a great extent. Hence it may be said that observation of social phenomena becomes scientific when it i) is pursued with stated objectives ii) systematically organized iii) recording of what was observed done in a scientific manner iv) embeds certain mechanisms to resist bias and uncontrolled observation.

Unlike other methods, in observation the researcher witnesses or experiences events or phenomena first hand. The researcher relies upon his/her sense impressions in interpreting the event or phenomena. Observation enables capturing social reality as it exists. Objectivity in observation is achieved through conceptual ordering of events or phenomena guided by theoretical perspective adopted in the study. Researcher's observation differs from that of a layperson on the grounds that the former engages in the act of observation with an explicit theory or set of hypotheses. A number of Sociologists have relied on observation in theory building. For example, Georg Simmel, Goffman, Cooley, etc. (Sjoberg and Nett 1992). These Sociologists used behavioural events as evidence to conceptualize their theories on human behaviour and culture.

Observation technique is applied in three different forms in data collection by social scientists.

- a. Participant observation
- b. Non-participant observation
- c. Controlled observation

Self check exercise – 1

1. How researcher's observation differs from that of a layperson?

Layperson's account of social action doesn't follow the scientific rigour as it lacks theoretical framework, valid tools and techniques of data collection and is laced with subjectivity and bias. However, a researcher proceeds for observation with stated objectives, records events or actions systematically, incorporates mechanisms to resist bias and uncontrolled observation.

2. Why participant observation is important in social research?

Social scientists deal with social reality encompassed by events enacted by people in groups or collectives. There are certain explicit reasons for actions and events which can be understood by engaging with individuals in a structured interaction setting (for example, formal interview or interview schedule) of a short duration. However, there is a tacit world which is neither discernible to the researcher through tools mentioned nor through any interaction for a short time. Tacit world reflects the inner core of a social group which can be understood only through continuous, sustained and systematic interaction. By being an observer the researcher becomes part of the group, gains confidence of the group members and thus enters the tacit world to know the reasons for actions.

4. Participant Observation

In a sense all social science research is a form of participant observation, because we cannot study the social world without being part of it (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983). In observation the research situation is considered egalitarian as the observer and the observed are inhabitants of a shared social and cultural field and capable of mutual recognition by virtue of a shared humanity, although they belong to different cultures.

Social scientists define participant observation as the one in which researcher engages in activities of the persons s/he is studying. Participant observation refers to a research approach in which the major activity is characterized by a prolonged period of contact with subjects in the place in which they normally spend their time. During the encounters, data, in the form of field notes, are unobtrusively and systematically collected (Bogdan 1973).

Drawing upon the rich tradition of participant observation established by Malinowski and his followers, Srinivas (2009: 582) summarises participant observation as the one 'consists in well-trained anthropologist going to the area, or people of his (her) choice, spending a long enough period with them, usually 12 to 18 months, staying in conditions similar to those of the natives, being able to speak to them in their own language, winning the friendship of the people, collecting information through the use of well-known anthropological techniques such as conducting census surveys,

collecting genealogical information, selective use of questionnaires, informal and in-depth interviews, and above all, through participation in the activities of the people rituals as well as secular’.

Participant observation requires a particular approach to recording observations, which is done through field notes. For ethnographers the field notes are crucial so are data collected through questionnaire to a survey researcher. Participant observation is a method in which an observer takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions and events of the people being studied as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of culture (Dewalt, et al. 1998). Explicit culture is what we know, or what we can know with ease. However, tacit aspects of culture lie outside the cognitive abilities of the researcher or for that matter, outsiders to that culture. Malinowski (1922), anthropologist who pioneered the art of ethnography, emphasises on everyday interactions and observations rather than on using directed inquiries into specific behaviours.

Debate on participant observation raises two important issues - the degree of participation, and observation in data collection. Participation implies emotional involvement while observation requires detachment. Observation, in its strict sense, seeks to remove the researcher from the actions and behaviours so as to reduce the influence of the situation on the researcher. On the other hand participation is described as ‘going native’ and ‘becoming the phenomenon (Bernard, 1994). Spradley (1980) distinguishes between different types of participation. ‘Non-participation’ is one type of participation in which information can be acquired about a particular cultural context without participation. It is acquired by watching television, reading newspapers or reading diaries or novels. ‘Moderate participation’ is another type of participation where in researcher goes to the scene of action but doesn’t actively participate or interact, or only occasionally interacts with people involved. Researcher lives outside the community of research and commute to the field to collect data. ‘Active participation’ is generally synonymous with participant observation where in researcher engages in almost all the activities along with the members of the group or community. Spradley also distinguishes another type what is called as ‘Complete participation’. In this the researcher becomes a member of the group that is being studied. For example, taking on the role of a cab driver or other roles of the group or community where study is conducted. Geertz (1995) talks about the extent of emotional involvement with the people studied. Tedlock (1991) argues that participant observation is a paradox because the researcher seeks to understand the native’s viewpoint, without going native in true sense.

Dewalt, et al. (1998) provide an account of attitudes required to do participant observation

- i. The researcher has to approach the field site with an open mind and a non judgemental attitude.
- ii. In the initial period, it is normal to feel awkward and unsure when participating and observing a new situation. As the researcher learns more, s/he begins to feel much more comfortable and confident.
- iii. Errors do occur during the course of field work. Most of these, however, can be overcome with time and patience.
- iv. It is important to be a careful observer. This is a skill that can be enhanced through practice.
- v. It is important to be a good listener.
- vi. Researcher should be open to being surprised and to learning the unexpected.

5. Stages of participant observation

Bernard (1988) outlines the following stages that any social scientist engaged in participant observation research encounters during the course of fieldwork. They are a) initial contact b) shock c) discovering the obvious d) the break e) focusing f) exhaustion, the second break and frantic activity, and g) leaving.

- a) *Initial contact:* Many researchers enter the field with enthusiasm and excitement of observing a new culture. They are attracted to the idea of living in a new cultural setting. As Taylor and Bogdan (1984) point out, the task of the researcher is to establish or open relationships with informants. They conduct themselves in such a way that they become an unobtrusive part of the scene. During the first days of field work the observer tries to ‘feel out the situation’ and ‘learn the ropes’. S/he tries to learn how to act appropriately in the setting. ‘During the initial period, collecting data is secondary to getting to know the setting and people’. Taylor and Bogdan (1984) suggest that researchers jot down some general questions before they enter the field. It is also important to explain who you are to all people in the setting.
- b) *Shock:* Bernard (1988) cautions the researchers that along with the euphoria comes the shock of being placed in a new cultural setting. Apart from the issues of stay, food, etc. researchers also face the anxiety of collecting good data. Culture shock also comes from the feeling that people really may not be comfortable with the presence of a stranger in their midst. This may generate the feeling of loneliness and the urge to speak to someone. However, quite contrary to this is the problem of lack of privacy. After the initial few days of settling in the field site the researcher may face the constant visits of informants, or gaze of neighbours or enquiries from others. All these add to the loss of personal time. In some cultures it may be so that there is no concept of privacy at all. Such situations place the researcher in the midst of persons all the time. Bernard quotes M.N. Srinivas (1979) on the issue of privacy during research;

I was never left alone. I had to fight hard even to get two or three hours absolutely to myself in a week of two. ...I suffered from social claustrophobia as long as I was in the village and sometimes the feeling became so intense that I just had to get out.

A good way to overcome such problems is to engage in task oriented works like ‘making maps, taking censuses, doing household inventories, collecting genealogies, and so on’.

- c) *Discovering the obvious:* Once the cultural shock fades away, researcher settle down to a systematic data collection. When the informants let the researcher in to the finer aspects of culture the obvious aspects of such culture maybe unravelled. For example, Bernard (1988) talks about the discovery that ‘women have more power in the community than meets the eye’ or method of dispute resolution which operates the formal laws through informal mechanisms. Such discoveries raise enthusiasm among researchers ‘to collect more data, to accept every invitation, by every informant, to every event, to fill the days with observation and to fill the nights with writing up field notes’.
- d) *The break:* It comes after three or four months of fieldwork. Bernard (1988) says it as an important part of participant observation. He suggests that break provides an opportunity for

the researcher to get some distance from the field site. This distance, both physical and emotional from the informants, people and culture helps the researcher to evolve a perspective. It enables the researcher to reflex upon the field site, data collection, and the objectives of the research. During this time researchers get opportunity to share their initial experiences and findings with colleagues, collect additional information on the field site from other secondary sources. The break thus enables the researcher to introspect and develop objectivity in research. On return to the field site, most often, the researchers are welcomed by their hosts, informants and people. This is because people in the field site believe the genuine interests of the researcher.

- e) *Focusing*: As the break gives an opportunity to fine tune the process of data collection, researcher generally become more focused on research problem, objectives, sources of data, and the gaps in the existing data. Although researcher enters the field site with a design, more often, it undergoes changes owing to the emerging contingencies in the field. The process of modifications in the research design and justifications for such would be done at this stage of research.
- f) *Exhaustion, the Second Break, and Frantic Activity*: Once the researcher begins to feel that the data collection is exhausted it becomes necessary to take a second break. Bernard (1988) observes that sometimes researcher may mistakenly call off data collection thinking that the informants offer no more additional information. At this stage a short break gives the researcher time to critically look at the data and objectives of research. This enables the researcher to take stock of the situation, available time and focus on priorities. Any gaps in the data or missing links may be identified by being out of the field site for a while and plug the gaps by visiting the field site again. This stage of participant observation involves frantic activity to collect data at a greater speed as the time left for field work is less.
- g) *Leaving the field*: 'Participant observation is an intensely intimate and personal experience' (Bernard, 1988). Informants, neighbours, hosts may become close friends with whom the researcher might have spent relatively longer time. The researcher must be careful to letting them know the plans to leave the field site and prepare them in advance. Words of appreciation and recognition of their help in the culturally appropriate manner is of great importance in participant observation.

Further, Taylor and Bogdan (1984) describe certain key aspects of participant observation.

- a) *Negotiating the role of researcher*: Negotiation of the different of aspects of fieldwork, like what, when and whom to observe, takes place continuously throughout the data collection process. Sometimes informants attempt to hijack the course of data collection by trying to impose their will on the researcher. Researcher, in trying to be good with the informants, sometimes may be influenced by some informants. 'You should try to resist attempts of informants to control your research' (Taylor and Bogdan 1984). The next problem is with the timings for accessing certain research situations. Some places are visited at appropriate times. This may be more evident in certain organizations. Otherwise, established practices in certain institutions make it difficult to access informants at odd hours. For example, women informants may be willing to spare some time to discuss or share issues of research interests with the researcher during the mid noon as they complete their daily chores by that time. As

researcher gains acceptance s/he may exercise the power to select the places and times of observation.

- b) *Establishing rapport*: Establishing rapport is critical in participant observation. It means to be developing a feeling of empathy and having their acceptance. Researcher's presence should be comfortable to the people. Researcher should learn skill of understanding informants' nonverbal communication, their language, and perspectives. Some guidelines for establishing rapport are
- i. Paying homage to their routines
 - ii. Connecting with informants by highlighting commonalities between the cultures of researcher and the field site.
 - iii. Helping people in the field site in their daily chores or at the time of need.
 - iv. By being polite and humble
 - v. Paying attention and acting showing interest in what people say
- c) *Participation*: The extent of participation in people's activities is to be decided by the researcher. It is contingent upon the cultural aspects of people being studied. Active participation in some cultural settings may be acceptable while becomes problematic in other settings. Taylor and Bogdan (1984) suggest the following guidelines
- i. Where involvement places the researcher in a competitive situation with informants it is better to withdraw
 - ii. Researcher should avoid acting and talking in ways that don't fit. For example, dressing appropriately, talking or laughing loudly, etc.
 - iii. Any participation that interferes with the researcher's ability to collect data should be avoided.
 - iv. Avoid over-identification or 'going native'. Abandoning the role of researcher and over participation poses problems for the researcher.
- d) *Key informants*: They are the primary source of information and access to the field site for the researcher. In the early phase of participant observation, the researcher looks for those who accept him/her more readily, spend time and guide. However, a word of caution is that the researcher should try to 'hold back from developing close relationships until one has developed a good feel for the setting' (Taylor and Bogdan 1984). It is also unwise to depend too much on some or few leaving others for information.
- e) *Field tactics*: Moving beyond some key informants who provided information in the initial phase of research the researcher tries to broaden the horizon of information sources. Taylor and Bogdan (1984) suggest some tactics to be used while collecting data at this stage of research.
- i. By acting naive yet as an interested outsider the researcher can gain greater access to information
 - ii. It is important to be present at the right place at the right time to collect data
 - iii. It is advisable for the researcher not to allow the informants to know too much of what exactly is needed for research. This is because the informants might hide information or stage events for the benefit of the researcher.

- iv. Once the researcher gains confidence and understanding s/he may use aggressive tactics in data collection. Use of obtrusive research technique at this stage may not pose problems for the researcher.
- f) *Asking questions:* It is appropriate to ask questions in such a way as to enable the respondents to talk about it without inhibitions. Thus, questions posed by the researcher should be sympathetic to the perspectives of the respondents of the situation. Questions should not be intimidating, prejudicial and presupposed. Informants must be encouraged to talk more. Listening becomes an asset for the researcher. Once the researcher acquires greater familiarity with the research setting the questions s/he asks become more focused. At this stage it is also possible for the researcher to discourage informants from repeating the known information, and seek more information on issues of researcher's interest.
- g) *Field Notes:* In participant observation field notes are of great importance. Field notes are the sources of raw data. Data in participant observation is generated by writing field notes. Use of audio and video recording devices is more common while capturing what the respondent says during a formal interaction. Events can also be recorded using audio, video and audio-visual recording devices. The use of these devices helps the researcher to analyse words, behaviours of the actors involved at a later point of time. However, the importance of writing field notes is immense. Researcher can write notes recording the observation of day-to-day events and behaviour, conversations, and casual interviews which are the key sources of data in participant observation method. Observation doesn't provide any data unless it is recorded in a systematic fashion. A caution on field notes is that they should be written as soon as possible as memory is more fleeting and untrustworthy. Dewalt et al. (1998) caution that 'if the researcher's daily reactions to events and contexts are not recorded, it will be virtually impossible to reconstruct the development of understanding, and be able to review the growing relationship between the researcher and study participants in a manner that allows for reflexivity at the end of the process'. Field notes don't just refer to the recording of event of behaviour as observed by the researcher, but also contain the reflections of the researcher. Field notes are indispensable part of participant observation. They include descriptions of people, events, and conversations as well as observer's actions, feelings, and hunches or working hypothesis. Some hints for the researchers on field notes from Taylor and Bogdan (1984) are;
 - i. Pay attention to the observation setting
 - ii. Shift focus from a 'wide angle' to a 'narrow angle'
 - iii. Look for key words in people's remarks
 - iv. Concentrate on the first and last remarks in each conversation
 - v. Play back remarks and scenes in your mind
 - vi. Leave the setting as soon as you have observed as much as you remember
 - vii. Record your field notes as soon as possible after observing
 - viii. Draw a diagram of the setting and trace your movements through it
 - ix. Once you have drawn a diagram and traced your own movements, outline specific events and conversations that occurred at each point in time before you record your field notes
 - x. If there is any time lag between observing and recording the field notes, tape record a summary or outline of the observation

- xi. Pick up pieces of lost data after you have recorded your field notes.

On the form of notes, Taylor and Bogdan (1984) suggest some guidelines;

- i. Start each set of notes with a title page
 - ii. Include the diagram of the setting at the beginning of the notes
 - iii. Leave margins wide enough for your and others' comments
 - iv. Form new paragraphs often
 - v. Use quotation marks to record remarks as often as possible
 - vi. Use pseudonyms for the names of people and places
 - vii. Make at least three copies of your notes
- h) *Triangulation*: In participant observation data collected through one method is verified through other methods. Instead of relying on single source researchers are encouraged to collect data on same aspects from multiple sources. This checks the researcher's as well as informant's bias. Also that multiple sources of data provide deeper insights into the setting. Historical and public documents, official reports, memos, correspondence, contracts, salary schedules, files, evaluation forms and diaries provide important information. Sometimes these sources may help guiding the researcher in observation, interviews and interactions with informants and people.

M.N. Srinivas, Indian Anthropologist who pioneered participant observation, suggests three stages in the field experience; bewilderment, illumination, and distancing (2009: 569). The first stage occurs in the initial period of field work during which the researcher is bewildered looking at the happenings around him/her. The second stage of illumination refers to the sense making of the behaviour of people by the researcher around him/her, which occurs at a much later point. The third and final stage refers to the process of distancing oneself (researcher) from the experiences of field work (refer chapter Participant Observation, 561-570 in the book *Collected Essays*, The Oxford India: Srinivas, 2009, for a better understanding).

It is important to note that only a small part of the observation may be directly relevant to the theme the researcher is interested in. Historical understanding of the current situation and other issues connected to the theme of research would give lot of information from which the researcher has to use the relevant part. This only suggests that no social phenomena or event can be studied in isolation of its historical past and interconnected institutions. Srinivas (2009: 583) also suggests for developing 'empathy' to conduct a good participant observation.

Self check exercise – 2

- 3. What is the instrument of data collection in participant observation?

Researcher

- 4. Who are Key informants?

Key informants are the primary sources of information. They are the members of the group or community being studied. Researcher relies on them heavily in the initial stages to gain

access to the field site. Generally, the key informants are those who accept the researcher more readily, spend time and guide.

5. Why field notes in participant observation are important?

Field notes are nothing but the personal account of the researcher on what s/he observes on the given day. Information obtained through observation, interactions, discussions, etc. are to be recorded every day. Sometimes instead of writing field notes some researchers also make use of audio devices to record their narration of the day's observations which are transcribed at a later stage. Events can also be recorded using audio, video and audio-visual recording devices. The use of these devices helps the researcher to analyse words, behaviours of the actors involved at a later point of time.

6. What is triangulation?

To overcome the bias of the researcher or the key informants, to fill the inadequate data and to check the authenticity of information gathered researcher collects information on the same issue or event from multiple sources. This is known as triangulation. Instead of relying on single source researchers are encouraged to collect data on same aspects from multiple sources.

6. Importance of participant observation

Participant observation enhances the quality of data collected and interpretation of data. This is possible through tacit understanding of people's behaviour and field situation. Every day life and activities of people studied is known to the researcher through tacit understanding. As the researcher spends considerable amount of time with people being studied knowledge about them is acquired through interpretation of their actions. Thus data is available in the embodied form and is 'not there' to collect directly. Participant observation allows the researcher to understand and interpret nonverbal communication. James Clifford (1997) points out that 'the field worker who doesn't try to experience the world of the observed through participant observation will find it much harder to critically examine research assumptions and beliefs and themselves'. Proponents of participant observation suggest that 'perhaps the only way to understand the complexity of social life is to immerse oneself in it' (Bogdan 1973)

7. Advantages of participant observation

Participant observation is a long duration study. The period of stay of the researcher in the field site is relatively long. Such a long association with the members of the group or society studied may help the researcher to bring out the key features of the community or group which otherwise is not possible with any other method of research. Rich insights into the processes, actions and events help the researcher drawing valid conclusions. As the findings of the study are based on a firsthand account participant observation' validity is more when compared to other methods like survey or formal interview. The inner logic of certain social actions, structures, cultural behavioural patterns may be deciphered using participant observation method.

8. Limitations of participant observation

The most difficult part of non-participant observation method is that the researcher has limited control over the happenings in the field. It is difficult to fit the external social reality into a systematic form to draw conclusions. Participant observation suffers from the spread and size of units studied. It is conducted in a relatively small area and from a relatively small number of respondents. Observation of large groups or collectives spread over a vast area is difficult. During participant observation the researchers often get so involved that they tend to lose objectivity in their observation. A participant observer may become non-observing participant. Like other methods of intense research on small groups, findings of participant observation are less amenable for generalizations. Personal factors of the researcher become critical in participant observation. Factors like age, sex, race, ethnic background, presentation of self may influence the process of observation. Sufficient understanding of cultural aspects of the group or community studied on the part of the researcher may be essential for a good observation. Researcher proceeds for observation with theoretical framework and pre-fixed hypotheses with an assumption to test them. Sometimes these may become so fixed that the researcher ignores the other equally significant events in the field. Other issue is about the personal factors. As a member of society the researcher carries the social baggage loaded with certain definite ideas, values, beliefs, etc. to the field site. Researching tribal, rural, marginalized groups or in such settings by those researchers who have different brought up influence the way observation proceeds and notes making is done.

9. Non-participant observation

As opposed to participant observation, in non-participant observation the researcher doesn't try to become a part of the social group or community to be studied. The researcher remains outside the cultural ambit of the social group or community and yet performs the role of an observer, similar to that of a researcher in participant observation. Even the members of the community being studied would be aware of the status of the researcher. There is no ambiguity on the part of both the parties of observation i.e. the researcher and the people studied, about the status of the researcher vis-a-vis the research is concerned. Non-participant observation is thus called as quasi-participant observation. The researcher in non-participant observation research settings remain an outsider throughout the study period. This position of the researcher allows her/him to be objective in recording observations. It is also possible that the members of the group being studied feel free in the company of the researcher who is an outsider. However, this technique offers limited scope to understand the research situations. Insightful socio-cultural accounts of events, actions of the members of the group or community will remain elusive with non-participant method.

10. Controlled observation

In this type of observation effort is directed at minimizing the influence of researcher in recording the observations. It is a widely held notion that social scientists, how much ever they try to restrain from imposing their values, ideas, beliefs in observation, fail to capture social reality objectively. Hence there have been attempts at isolating the effects of the researcher's social background upon her/his observations on the social group under study. Usage of carefully drawn schedules and advanced equipment in recording an event or action by camera, tape recorder, maps, photographs, socio-metric scales, etc. may enhance objectivity in observation. However, speaking in a stricter sense a Sociologist using controlled observation methods and precision tools is no different from a zoologist

or a botanist attempting to study the natural habitat. Hence it is difficult to conduct controlled observation in social research. However, to a great extent, systematic observation limits the bias of the observer.

11. Ethics in Observation

Social scientists are often accused of having a predatory relationship with their objects of study, especially where these 'objects' are relatively powerless, poor people from low status, or members of ethnic minorities (Jackson 1983). Thus, observation method raises many ethical questions. Particularly, participant observation is a much debated method among all social science research methods. This is because of the fact that researcher lives with the people being studied for relatively a longer period of time, participates in their day-to-day activities, observes them from close quarters, gains access to the intimate aspects of social, cultural life of people. At the same time s/he has the task of recording of the observed events, phenomena, activities in a faithful manner. Bernard (1988) suggests that what could clearly be considered as 'gossip' during informal conversation can become data for the researcher. Such kind of issues becomes part of the ethical concerns of the social science research. It is often questioned that whether the researcher informs the people s/he interacts with for data collection about the usage of such information. To quote Bernard 'field workers rarely recite their informed consent script during afternoon conversations carried out while swinging in hammocks, while drinking a beer in the bar after a day's work, or while in bed with lover'.

There are ethical questions regarding the publication of information collected through field notes. Related to this is the preservation of anonymity of participants identified in field notes. It is suggested that with computerization maintenance of anonymity becomes easier than otherwise. Another ethical concern about participant observation is the extent of attachment developed by the researcher with the respondents or informants during field work. It is reported by many anthropologists who used ethnography that they have entered into fictive kinship relationships in order to gain access and confidence of people studied in a community or group. It may be said that most often such relationships enabled efficient data collection albeit at the cost of the researcher's personal time and energy.

12. Summary

Social scientists have been employing observation as methodological tool to collect empirical data successfully. Participant observation has been the most important tool of data collection in social science research. Researcher immerses herself/himself in the cultural world of the community or group under study and records information systematically. Usually the field sites are relatively small but the duration of contact with the members of the community is long. It is a naturalistic enquiry in which researcher obtains information firsthand through intense and prolonged interaction. The primary data of observation is field notes. Apart from participant observation, researcher also employs other methods like interview and enumeration or sampling during the course of field work. Informal interviewing is a widely used technique by the researcher while interacting with the key informants. Similarly, enumeration and sampling enables the researcher to get an idea about the socioeconomic aspects of the people studied. Some researchers also conduct census of the people. This is to suggest that observation method is not always employed in isolation, rather, when employed with other techniques it yields comprehensive results. This module discusses the meaning, importance and different types of observation, and primarily focused on participant observation, which is the most

widely used technique in social science research. It explains the finer details of conducting participant observation and its advantages and limitations.

Did you know?

- The method of participant observation was first developed by Bronislaw Malinowski. He conducted field work in the Trobriand Islands, off the eastern coast of New Guinea. He spent 23 months in the Islands in two periods: from June 1915 to May 1916 and from October 1917 to October 1918. His famous work is *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*.
- M.N. Srinivas, who used participant observation extensively in the studies in Rampura village, near Mysore in Karnataka, and among Coorgs in Karnataka, developed the concepts Sanskritization and Westernization, dominant caste, vote bank and the book-view versus field-view (Srinivas 2009; 566). These concepts have revolutionized research in Sociology and Anthropology in India, and their relevance cross the disciplinary boundaries and remain valid even today.
- Street corner society, the pioneering work of W.H. Whyte is based on participant observation of an Italian slum in the suburbs of Boston. It is perhaps the most referred work on participant observation in sociology.
- Some anthropologists risked their lives in understanding the behaviour of criminal groups. They used participant observation method making themselves vulnerable to dangers associated with dealing with such groups. The work by Wright and Decker (1997) showcases the best of participant observation method as it unravels the behaviour of street criminals which otherwise would be a hearsay to others. Confronting the dangers in the field Richard Wright and Scott Decker provide an extremely rich account of offender's routines and decision-making and illuminates the academic fraternity about the dark side of social behaviour. Read *Armed robbers in action: stickups and street culture* (1997) for a captivating and insightful account on participant observation.

Websites:

Jelle J.P. Wouters and Tanka B. Subba

https://www.anthro.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/ISCA/JASO/JASO_Jan_2011/Wouters_Subba.pdf

Observation Techniques | Center for Enhanced Learning
celt.ust.hk › Teaching Resources › Action Research

OBSERVATION METHODS - Colorado College

<https://faculty1.coloradocollege.edu/~afenn/web/...8.../Observation.pdf>

How to use observations in a research project.

web.simmons.edu/~tang2/courses/CUAcourses/lsc745/.../observation.pdf

Participant Observation, Qualitative research methods

<https://assessment.aas.duke.edu/.../ParticipantObservationFieldGuide.pdf>

Data Collection Methods - Sage Publications

www.sagepub.com/upm-data/10985_Chapter_4.pdf

Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method ...

www.qualitative-research.net › Home › Vol 6, No 2 (2005)

Observation - Qualitative Research Guidelines Project

www.qualres.org › Home Page

Interesting Facts:

- M N Srinivas's book *The Remembered Village* is based on the study he conducted in Rampura village. What is interesting here is the name of the book. The term remembered is added because the field notes of his work in the village were burnt in a fire when an arsonist set the Centre for Advanced Study in the Behavioural Sciences, at Stanford University on April 24 1970. M N Srinivas had to write this ethnography from memory of Rampura village and thus the name remembered village! However, the book turned out to be an influential work in social anthropology. Wouters and Subba observe that the book

(T)he remembered village has turned into a hallmark of post-colonial Indian sociology and anthropology. Through this book, Srinivas introduced, or at least popularized, what are now influential ideas and concepts like 'the dominant caste', 'sanskritization' and 'westernization' in the context of inter-caste relations. (Refer Jelle J.P. Wouters and Tanka B. Subba https://www.anthro.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/ISCA/JASO/JASO_Jan_2011/Wouters_Subba.pdf for a detailed account)

- Andre Beteille's work of participant observation is published as a book titled *Caste, class and power*, based on the field work conducted in a village in Tanjore district in Tamil Nadu where he lived for a little less than a year in 1961-62. In an article *The Tribulations of Fieldwork* (1972) Beteille presents the problems which confronted him in the course of fieldwork and the lessons he learnt by trying. The village name he refers in his study Sripuram is a fictitious name!

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