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The Challenge of Involvement and Detachment in Participant Observation

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Abstract

The technique of participant observation, and the roles involved, have been widely discussed in the literature across a range of settings and topics. However, researchers rarely argue for a particular role that a participant observer should adopt. In this paper, I attempt to argue for the participant-as-observer role. I do so by reviewing existing literature on the topic. I argue that the complete observer and the complete participant roles are not applicable in today's research environment because, aside from their practical problems, they violate the ethical requirement of informed consent. I argued further that the observer-as-participant role, with its limited involvement in the life of informants, not only prevents the researcher from fully understanding the context of the study, but also instils doubts and suspicion in informants, leading to concealment or distortion of data. I therefore conclude that, where all the four roles are possible, the participant-as-observer role, which offers a higher degree of involvement, should be employed to enable the researcher to get deeper understanding of the context under study. I add, however, that the participant observer should, in this case, account for his/her biases and their possible effects on his/her observations.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Participant Observation, Involvement, Detachment, Life-World

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The Challenge of Involvement and Detachment in Participant Observation

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The technique of participant observation, and the roles involved, have been widely discussed in the literature across a range of settings and topics. However, researchers rarely argue for a particular role that a participant observer should adopt. In this paper, I attempt to argue for the participant-as-observer role. I do so by reviewing existing literature on the topic. I argue that the complete observer and the complete participant roles are not applicable in today's research environment because, aside from their practical problems, they violate the ethical requirement of informed consent. I argued further that the observer-as-participant role, with its limited involvement in the life of informants, not only prevents the researcher from fully understanding the context of the study, but also instils doubts and suspicion in informants, leading to concealment or distortion of data. I therefore conclude that, where all the four roles are possible, the participant-as-observer role, which offers a higher degree of involvement, should be employed to enable the researcher to get deeper understanding of the context under study. I add, however, that the participant observer should, in this case, account for his/her biases and their possible effects on his/her observations. Keywords: Qualitative Research, Participant Observation, Involvement, Detachment, Life-World

An important data collection approach in qualitative research is participant observation (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Participant observation is a research activity in which the researcher "participates in the daily life of the people under study, observing things that happen, listening to what is said, and questioning people, over some length of time" (Becker & Geer, cited in Baker, 2006, p. 173). The researcher participates, for as long as possible, in their everyday practice and become familiar with it, in order to observe its everyday performances (Flick, 2009; Flick, Kardoff, & Steinke, 2004). Participant observation "requires the researcher to spend considerable time in the field with the possibility of adopting various roles in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the people being studied" (Baker, 2006, p. 173). In order to understand things from the perspective of the people being studied the participant observer enters into conversation with some or all of them (Becker, 1958).

Participant observation allows the researcher to study people in their native environment, thereby offering the opportunity to understand things from the perspective of the people being studied (Baker, 2006; Lopez-Dicastillo & Belintxon, 2014; Willig, 2008). Studying people in their native environment permits the researcher to discover "what situations they ordinarily meet and how they behave in them" (Becker, 1958, p. 652). Participating in the daily life of people also enables researchers to get deeper insight into the culture of the people being studied. Participant observation, therefore, prevents biases in interpretation of data (Bositis, 1988, p. 334; Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003; Haug & Teune, 2008). Studying people in their natural environment thus helps researchers to unearth crucial information that would be denied in a self-report data retrieved from interviews and focused groups (Zhao & Ji, 2014). Adler and Adler (1994), therefore, referred to participant observation as the "bedrock source of human knowledge" (p. 377).

Notwithstanding the benefits of participant observation, the method also presents the researcher with a number of practical and ethical challenges (Iacono, Brown, & Holtham, 2009; Watts, 2010). In fact, Bositis (1988) asserts "there may be no type of research design more complex, and therefore more misunderstood, than participant observation" (p. 334). One of the major challenges faced by participant observers is the need to combine participation in the activities of the people being studied with maintenance of a professional distance that allows adequate observation and recording of data (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Fetterman, 1998; Zhao & Ji, 2014). It is imperative that the researcher involves himself in the lives of the people being studied, because close familiarity with subjects helps to provide deeper understanding of their culture, hence preventing cultural biases during data interpretation (Lohman, 1937). However, close contact also brings about sympathy and identity, which, in turn, may reduce the researcher's level of criticism (Gold, 1958; Schwartz & Schwartz, 1955). Therefore, "despite the level of involvement with the study group, the researcher must always remember his primary role as a researcher and remain detached enough to collect and analyze data relevant to the problem under investigation" (Baker, 2006, p. 172).

The question then is: "*To what extent should the researcher involve himself/herself in the lives of the people being studied?*" This is the question that I attempt to answer in this paper. The question is tackled in relation to the four roles that a participant observer can adopt according to Gold (1958).

Gold (1958) identified four roles that a participant observer can adopt, namely, the complete observer, the complete participant, the observer-as-participant, and the participant-as-observer. The particular role adopted by a researcher is determined by the degree of involvement that he/she wants to attain in the lives of informants. The technique of participant observation, and the roles involved, have been widely discussed in the literature across a range of settings and topics. However, not many researchers argue directly for a particular role. In this paper, I attempt to argue for the participant-as-observer role as the one to be preferred in research situations where all the four are possible. I do this by reviewing some existing literature on participant observation. In the subsequent sections, I briefly examine each of the roles, pointing out their advantages and disadvantages. In my final discussion, I try to position each role in today's research environment, thereby establishing their compatibility, or otherwise, with present-day ethical requirements. Emphasis is then placed on the "observer-as-participant" and "participant-as-observer" roles - which satisfy the ethical requirement of informed consent. I then argue in favour of participant-as-observer role as the one that is more likely to yield accurate and reliable results.

The Complete Observer

According to Gold (1958), the complete observer neither participates nor interacts with informants in the course of the study. He only listens and observes (Baker, 2006). According to Baker, the complete observer tries as much as possible to conceal his identity, thereby collecting data mainly through eavesdropping. The complete observer may also use photographing, videotaping and audiotaping (Adler & Adler, 1994). Though the complete observer role allows the researcher to remain completely detached from the group being studied (Baker, 2006), it also has a number of disadvantages. It denies the researcher the opportunity to fully understand the context being studied. This is because the researcher, completely detached from the group, is less likely to hear entire conversations (Baker, 2006). Besides, the complete observer cannot ask informants questions to clarify what they have said or what he has observed about them (Gold, 1958).

Aside from limited access to data, which characterizes the complete observer role, the role also has ethical implications. In order not to alter the situation being studied, the complete

observer does not reveal his identity to the informants. This cannot stand the test of present day research environment where institutional review boards require the researcher to obtain informed consent with informants before undertaken a research. The researcher is obliged to inform his/her informants of the nature and scope of the investigation (Iacono, Brown, & Holtham, 2009). The aim of ethical principles, according to Stanley and McLaren (2007), is "to protect the rights, health and well-being of research participants" (p. 35). In view of this, Watts (2010) argue that ethical principles should take precedence even in situations where violating them could enable the researcher to obtain richer data. Highlighting the inevitability of informed consent in research, the Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Participant Observation, adopted by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board (SSH REB) of the University of Toronto in 2005, recommends that the researcher should seek the highest standards in applying the principle of informed consent when using participant observation. At the least, the guidelines suggest that the researcher should resort to general announcements or other more informal means to disseminate as broadly as possible the researcher's identity and purpose among the group. Thus, "the publication of participant observation research, especially where the subjects were not fully cognizant that they were being observed, is particularly replete with ethical problems" (Jackson, 1983, p. 42). This becomes even more serious considering the fact that participant observation may involve photographing, videotaping or audiotaping of individuals (Baker, 2006).

The Complete Participant

The "complete participation is the ultimate level of involvement" (Baker, 2006, p. 177). In this role, the researcher goes native and studies a group as a member (Adler & Adler, 1994; Baker, 2006; Spradley, 1980). In order not to change the flow of events, the researcher conceals his identity (Baker, 2006; Jarvie, 1969). According to Baker (2006), this role offers the researcher deeper understanding into the context being studied. However, it also comes with a number of practical and ethical problems. Since the researcher goes native, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, for him to record events accurately and objectively (Gold, 1958; Spradley, 1980). Besides, as in the complete observer role, the concealed identity of the complete participant is against today's ethical requirement of informed consent (Adler & Adler, 1994; Baker, 2006; Jarvie, 1969).

Observer-as-Participant

In the Observer-as-participant role, the researcher observes more and participates less (Baker, 2006). It is less interrogative and involves one-visit interviews (Baker, 2006; Bositis, 1988; Jarvie, 1969). Though the identity of the researcher is revealed to informants, the researcher is expected to maintain his professional distance and should "not cross into the friendship domain" (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 380). "Maintaining contact with the observed outside the role of observer is viewed as an interference rather than as an opportunity for gathering additional data" (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1955, p. 348).

One major advantage of the observer-as-participant role is that it prevents researchers from going native (Baker, 2006). In other words, the observer-as-participant role enables researchers to detach themselves emotionally from the people being studied so that they can record, evaluate and analyse data more accurately and objectively (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1955). However, detachment can also be "a major disadvantage" (Baker, 2006, p. 174). As Jarvie (1969) asserts, the best way to observe a way of life "involves living that way of life" (p. 505). Brief contacts with subjects will, therefore, not be enough for the participant observer to understand the context of the study. Such brief contacts would rather "expose an observer-

as-participant to many inadequately understood universes of discourses that he cannot take time to master" (Gold, 1958, pp. 221-222). The end result can, therefore, be misconception of discourses and events (Baker, 2006).

Some researchers also argue that the observer-as-participant role reduces the likelihood of the participant observer to affect the situation, thus giving him the opportunity to observe events in their natural state (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1955). In my opinion, this argument can only hold in the complete observer role, which violates the present-day ethical requirement of informed consent. As Schwartz and Schwartz (1955) maintain, even the mere presence of the observer can alter the course of events once informants are aware that he is there to observe them. In other words, once the informants become aware that somebody is observing them, which ethically should be the case, they are likely to alter their behaviour and discourses in one way or the other, irrespective of the role that the observer assumes. Øyen (1972) made a similar observation, that the observer, whether aware or not, exerts a great deal of influence on the situation being studied. Øyen therefore considers the use of the label "neutral observation" in relation to participant observation as "deceptive and misleading" (p. 266).

A critical analysis will reveal that the passive attitude of the observer-as-participant is more likely to complicate issues rather than minimizing the effects of the researcher on the situation under study. Everyday experiences show that people are more likely to open up to friends than to strangers. People feel reluctant to discuss sensitive issues with strangers because they are often suspicious of their true intentions. This would most likely be the case in the observer-as-participant role. As Schwartz and Schwartz (1955) observed, informants are often suspicious and, sometimes, hostile to the researcher who does not want to get along with them. Though informants may be interested in the study, they may also be cautious, thereby concealing or distorting important data. Øyen (1972) observed that an observer who refuses to participate in the lives of informants tends to be "sealed off from communication and access to data" because he may be regarded as a kind of "inspector" (p. 254).

This problem may however be resolved or at least minimized, if the researcher gets more involved in the lives of informants. Schwartz and Schwartz (1955), observed that the negative feelings on the part of informants reduce through time as the researcher interacts closely with them, making the conversation between them and the researcher more ordinary. As the researcher gains the confidence of informants, they become more willing to open up on issues. This "facilitates his understanding of their inner life and their social world, and increases the validity and meaningfulness of his observations" (p. 350). Øyen (1972) also observed that interactions between the researcher and the informants on the informal level pave the way for communication within the formal setting. Even though this may pose the danger of the researcher being involved in the core values of the group being studied, it may also offer the researcher the opportunity to redefine his role as a neutral observer. In a study of small groups in Norway, Øyen observed that through the researcher's interaction with the group members outside their regular meetings, their perception of the researcher as an inspector diminished. This weakened the communication barrier between the researcher and the informants as the group sought to give the researcher the role of an advisor. While this "threatened the intended non-interference of the observer" (p. 254), it consequently gave him the "opportunity to explain his own role" (p. 260) to the group, which eventually enabled him to "recede to the intended neutral role, while being more or less accepted as a permanent member of the group" (p. 261).

Another disadvantage of the observer-as-participant role is the inability of the researcher to provoke behaviours. According to Bositis (1988), the researcher's role in participant observation is not only to observe behaviour but also to provoke behaviours and subsequently observe them. The participant observer may manipulate the situation through "verbal stimuli or behavioural cues" and observe responses (p. 338). This is however difficult,

if not impossible, with the observer-as-participant role since the researcher does not interact with informants on personal level.

Participant-as-Observers

In the participant-as-Observers role "the researcher becomes more involved with the insiders' central activities" (Baker, 2006, p. 177). The researcher develops relationships with informants through time (Baker, 2006; Jackson, 1983), and spends "more time and energy participating than observing" (Jackson, 1983, p. 41). The researcher's intention is to experience the life of the informants in order to understand it better (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1955). Unlike the complete participant role, the participant-as-observer reveals his identity to the informants (Bositis, 1988).

The participant-as-observer role is very important because it offers the researcher deeper insight into the context being studied. Close contacts with informants help the researcher to understand, in practical terms, nuances in their discourses, which cannot be obtained through one-visit interviews. This is because, as Adler and Adler (1994) observed, the friendly relationship enables the informants to "instruct the investigator in the intricacies of their personal and social worlds" (p. 380).

Unlike the observer-as-participant role where the informants may be suspicious of the researcher's intentions, the participant-as-observer goes beyond his formal role as a researcher to share in the sentiments of informants, making the informants convinced that the "observer's attitude toward them is one of respect and interest in them as human beings as well as research subjects" (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1955, p. 347). Through close interactions, "the psychological distance between observer and subject may be diminished and restraint in communication reduced" (p. 347), thereby minimizing the effect of the researcher on the situation. This way, the informants may not see the need to conceal, withhold or distort data.

Recounting her own fieldwork experience in a female gambling study, Li (2008) underscored the usefulness of the participant-as-observer role, although she did not use the exact term. According to Li, she began the study by adopting a covert (complete participant) role. While this role enabled her to observe and document both physical settings and social activities of female gamblers as the flow of gambling scenes naturally unfolded, she could not come to terms with the fact that she was violating the ethical requirement of informed consent. This, according to her, caused disturbing feelings of awkwardness and uneasiness in both parties on many occasions. As a result, she decided to employ the overt (observant-as-participant) role, but this could not solve the problem entirely. Li recounts that the overt role she employed enabled her to fulfill her ethical obligations as a researcher, but, on the other hand, restricted the amount and quality of data she could obtain. Once female gamblers were made known of her research role, they started to view her differently, treating her as a suspicious outsider who should not be trusted because she did not share their experiences. The problem, according to Li, was however solved when she adopted the participant-as-observer role, participating in female gambling culture as an insider and observing it as an outsider. Li summarised her experience in the following excerpt from her abstract:

By assuming a covert research role, I was able to observe natural occurrences of female gambling activities but unable to make peace with disturbing feelings of my research concealment. By making my study overt, I was able to fulfill ethical obligations as a researcher but unable to get female gamblers to speak their minds. I responded to such ethical dilemmas by adjusting the level of involvement, participating in female gambling culture as an insider and observing it as an outsider. (p. 100)

Li's experience presented above is similar to Øyen's (1972) experience during her study of small groups in Norway, when she observed that an observer who refuses to participate in the lives of informants tends to be "sealed off from communication and access to data" because he may be regarded as a kind of "inspector" (p. 254). It is no wonder then that Watts (2008) argued for the elimination of distance between the observer and the observed as a way of developing acceptance and trust.

Similarly, Iacono, Brown, and Holtham (2009) emphasise how their lead author Jessica Iacono, adopting an insider role when working on her doctoral thesis, managed to acquire rich data which she could not have obtained if she observed from outside. As a trader and a manager, Iacono was directly involved in the activities of the company where she conducted her research as a participant observer. This, according to the authors, enabled her to collect data "*discreetly* during the normal course of business, so that, although informants are aware of the research project, this awareness need not affect the interaction" (p. 45). The authors further argue that their lead author's experience as a practitioner enriched her academic work, while the reliability of her findings was increased by her credibility as an industry insider.

One major downside of the participant-as-observer role, however, is that the researcher may "go native," losing his ability to report data objectively (Gold, 1958, p. 221). In other words, the researcher may be so "affectively involved in such a way and to such a degree that he loses his perspective and his feelings obliterate his ability to observe" (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1955, p. 350).

Discussion and Conclusion

Over the years, qualitative researchers have been battling with the challenge of maintaining the balance between involvement and detachment when it comes to participant observation. While researchers participate in the lives of their informants in order to understand their life-worlds, they are also expected to detach themselves from the situation as much as possible so as to record events accurately and objectively. This requires the researcher to be "a stranger and a friend" at the same time (Jarvie, 1969, p. 505). As Jarvie argued, this is, in fact, not possible. Gold (1958) proposed four roles that a participant observer can assume, namely, the complete observer, the complete participant, the observer-as-participant, and the participant-as-observer. As afore mentioned, the complete observer and the complete participant roles, apart from their practical difficulties, are also plagued with ethical flaws. Both roles require that the researcher does not reveal his identity to the informants. Such roles cannot thrive in the present day research environment, which upholds the principle of informed consent. A participant observer is therefore left with the choice between the roles of observer-as-participant and participant-as-observer.

Experience shows that people are more willing to share information with friends than with strangers. People hesitate to share information with strangers because they are often sceptical about their intentions. As Øyen (1972) observed, people may see a visitor who is interested in their activities, but feels reluctant to participate, as a kind of inspector, thereby sealing him off from communication and access to data. Li (2008) recounted a similar experience during her study of female gambling culture. Informants in this case may, at best, distort data. This, however, is less likely to be the case if the person seeking information is a friend with whom the informant shares common values and interests.

Drawing from the above premise, it can then be said that a researcher who assumes the participant-as-observer role is more likely to get reliable data as compared to the one who adopts the observer-as-participant role. An observer-as-participant, a stranger, who visits informants once a while to collect data by way of short interviews, is more likely to create

doubts in the minds of his informants regarding his true intentions. As a result, the informants may conceal or distort data. Thus, even though the observer-as-participant can relatively detach himself from the situation and interpret data more objectively, the data he interprets "objectively" may, in fact, be insufficient or inaccurate. The objectivity with which he/she interprets the data cannot in any way compensate for the insufficiency or distortions. The issue is further complicated by the fact that the observer-as-participant, with his limited involvement, cannot fully understand the context being studied. This may lead to biased interpretation of data.

On the other hand, the participant-as-observer, through cordial relationships with informants, can obtain sufficient and accurate data. As a friend, informants can confide in him, and may see no need to conceal or distort data. Besides, his involvement in the lives of informants can offer him greater understanding of the context being studied and the data obtained. Thus, even though there is a possibility that the participant-as-observer would go native and interpret data more subjectively, this risk can, largely, be compensated for by the depth and accuracy of the data obtained.

Moreover, I concur with Schwartz and Schwartz (1955) who argued that, whether a researcher goes native or not depends less on the role he assumes than "his experience, awareness, and personality constellation and the way these are integrated with a particular social situation" (p. 350).

In conclusion, as far as the situation permits, a researcher who wants to employ the participant observation method should adopt the participant-as-observer role, which offers a higher degree of involvement. This will not only give the researcher deeper understanding of the context under study, but will also help him to gain the confidence of informants, thus yielding more reliable data. In doing so, however, the researcher should account for his/her biases and how they might have affected his/her observation.

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