

Participant observation and Fieldnotes

★ Participant Observation

In his book *Participant Observation*, James Spradley discusses how participant observation differs from ordinary social participation:

- **Selection of what to observe:** Researcher sees what is taking place as a "social situation"= Place + Actors + Activity, with varying emphasis.
- **Explicit awareness:** This is different from the usual way we go about life, which is why you may feel "overloaded" while doing it.
- **Wide-angle lens to zoom lens:** We capture as much context as possible. Think of it as a wide angle setting on a camera lens—ideally, you start broad so that you can describe the overall context, then move in to a middle level of focused observations when you have developed more focused research questions based on your observations, and finally zoom in for "selective observations" when you think you know how things work and want to test your hypothesis.
- **Dual purpose:** Participation and observation, on a spectrum. Some
- settings involve more passive forms of observation (studying how people use the library) while others demand researchers to participate more fully in the activity being observed (research in a samba school in Rio).
- **Insider/outsider experience:** Due to the "dual purpose," researcher
- simultaneously experiences the insider's engagement and the outsider's analytic distance.

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- **Introspection and reflexivity:** Researcher is the “research instrument,” and thinking carefully about the limits of your perspective and how participants perceive you is the quality of a good fieldworker.
- **Record keeping:** Extensive fieldnotes taken during or soon after fieldwork.

★ What to observe?

According to Spradley, every social situation has nine different dimensions:

1. *Space: the physical place*
2. *Actor: the people involved*
3. *Activity: a set of related acts people do*
4. *Object: the physical things that are present*
5. *Act: single actions that people do*
6. *Event: a set of related activities people carry out*
7. *Time: the sequencing that takes place*
8. *Goal: the things people are trying to accomplish*
9. *Feeling: the emotions felt and expressed*

(Spradley 1980: p. 78)

Spradley presents these as a matrix, showing researchers how to observe the intersections of two dimensions. With 81 different combinations, a good research should never run out of new angles for thinking about participant observation!

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Spradley also identifies several key principles for taking effective fieldnotes—meaning fieldnotes that will provide the data you need for later analysis. Here are the top three for novice researchers:

1 The Language ID principle

Pay close attention to who says what—come up with a way of marking to distinguish "participant terms" and your own "observer terms." You want to set your own words and analyses apart from your research participants—not because you are rejecting intersubjectivity, but because you don't want to put YOUR words in other people's mouths! This relates to point 2.

2 The Verbatim principle

Write down the important things people say verbatim as much as possible. You want to get as much participants' language as used in the setting—especially specialized terms or patterned ways of characterizing a problem. Paraphrasing is far less useful later on in the process—so use the verbatim principle as much as possible.

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3 The Concrete Principle:

When describing observations, use Concrete language as much as possible. "The child fought the preschool teacher when he asked her to clean up" is less concrete than, "the child clawed at the preschool teacher's arms, screaming and dragging her legs as the teacher gently picked her up and placed her in the time-out corner." Later, the researcher may want to distinguish between how Pre-school teachers deal with conflict when it's verbal versus physical. The researcher will be grateful they learned the "concrete principle" early on. Taking pictures can help jog your memory later on for writing more "concrete" fieldnotes.