9

Participant Observation

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Synopsis

Participant observation involves spending time being, living or working with people or communities in order to understand them. In other words, it is, as the name implies, a method based on participating and observing in which field-notes, sketches, photographs or video recordings are used as a method of data collection. The basis of this approach is to become, or stay, as close to the spatial phenomenon being studied as possible and it is thereby quite distinct from methodologies that emphasize distance and objectivity.

The chapter is organized into the following sections:

- What is participant observation?
- Commentators and players
- Doing participant observation/becoming the phenomenon
- Adequate commentaries on culture and society
- Results: respecifying the generalities of social science
- Final words of advice.

WHAT IS PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION?

> I have no great quickness of apprehension or wit . . . my power to follow a long and purely abstract train of thought is very limited . . . [but] I am superior to the common run of men in noticing things which easily escape attention, and in observing them carefully. (Charles Darwin, Preface to *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*)

Participant observation is perhaps the easiest method in the world to use since it is ubiquitous and we can all already do it. From the moment we are born we are, in various ways, observing the world around us and trying to participate in it. Children, acquiring language for the first time, listen and watch what, when and how their parents are doing what they are doing. They observe greetings and have greetings directed at them, and attempt to participate by, at first, looking and, later, waving and making sounds that approximate, and eventually are, hellos and goodbyes. It is, of course, not just children who use this method to acquire skills: surgical students spend a great deal of time observing surgery and are gradually entered into the practical demands of operating on patients as fully participating surgeons. International migrants, finding themselves in foreign countries, have the massive task of observing a multitude of activities and exactly how they are done in order to participate in new cultures. Amongst other background knowledge they have to acquire the locals' taken-for-granted ways of getting everyday things done, such as greetings, ordering coffee, queuing for buses, making small talk, paying their taxes and so on.

So far so good: participant observation is easy – it does not require the mastering of arcane skills or technical lexicons. Before you rush to adopt this method of fieldwork on the basis of its minimal social science requirements there are some other aspects of successful participant-observation that we will have to return to. You may have guessed already from the mention of surgeons and migrants that participant observation as a way of engaging with familiar and unfamiliar life-worlds will present you with a different curve to your learning, the steep climbing is elsewhere than on campus. Also, for better and for worse, because it is not an *external* method administered on research subjects, such as a questionnaire or a lab test, participant observation has *no preset formal steps* to doing it. Or rather the stages that anyone doing participant observation must go through are the stages *which arise out of the phenomenon and settings* you are investigating.

If you do not know how to do, or be something, then learning how to do or be that thing will be as hard for you as for anyone attempting to participate in it. Think of the effort and time required to do informative participant observation studies of air-traffic control (Harper and Hughes, 1993), mathematical problem-solving (Livingston, 1987) or playing jazz music (and these expert cultures have been studied through participant observation.) Before I give the impression that this method ought only to be used for the study of highly skilled groups and their settings, participant observation can be turned to such seemingly lowly skilled spatial phenomena as shopping in the supermarket or going clubbing (Malbon, 1999) or walking in the city (Watson, 1993). In these latter examples you may already be able to do them and the demands on you will then be to provide a commentary that describes them in revealing and interesting ways. Key to your success in doing participant observation is, as Charles Darwin says of his own powers, that you notice things that otherwise escape attention and that you observe *carefully and patiently*.

COMMENTATORS AND PLAYERS

A common mistake, made as often by well qualified social researchers as by those new to participant observation, is to take observation as the dominant element of participant observation. This is to some extent a legacy of both actual behaviourist research and endless comedy routines about white-coated observers who watch their research subjects in a detached, emotionless manner and are thereby able to provide objective descriptions of what was occurring.

Even though most of us who use participant observation no longer pursue this kind of objective observation, and gave up the white coats for t-shirts, we still underestimate the importance of participation, assuming that it is sufficient to pay attention to what is going on and then write down our observations.

To give you a sense of why it may not be enough to be a diligent observer, let us move on to what your participant observation should produce: *commentary*. Being able to comment on the culture, society and geography of various spaces and places is indeed the major requirement of doing geography. In that sense all geographers are commentators and many of them exceptionally good ones. If we think about sports commentators for a moment, as against social and cultural commentators, we can see that they are seldom the ones playing the game: they are sitting to one side observing it. Some sports commentators provide exasperatingly bad and irrelevant commentary because they have never played the game they are commenting on. One ingredient of a decent sports commentator is that he or she should be, or have been, even a bad or half-hearted player to offer any kind of insight into the game. Knowing *how* to play the game in no way guarantees insightful remarks since many of the outstanding players and competitors have very little to say. Shifting back to social and cultural research, it is the case that far too many of its researchers are only commentators and have never played. The point that is being reiterated here is that the best participant observation is generally done by those who have been involved in and tried to do and/or be a part of the things they are observing.

DOING PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION/BECOMING THE PHENOMENON

Despite my having suggested that there is no template for doing participant observation there are features in its course, which while not specifying what is to be done, will give you a sense of whether you are making any progress or not. If you have never been involved in the event, activity, phenomenon, group or whatever you are investigating then, on your arrival, you will find yourself cast into some category. You will be called, if not a 'greenhorn', 'beginner', then something worse such as an 'incompetent', 'tourist' or 'outsider'. This is not simply a pejorative term for you, it assigns you to a type which shapes up expectations of what you will be able to do, the perspective you will have on events and what you will need to be taught. It is also not such a bad place to start because people's assumptions about you will not be too high and you will be expected to be observing in order to learn how to become one of the group/company/ band/players. Recording your observations at this point is vital since, if all goes well, they should have changed by the time you are finished (see Box 9.1). They are also, at this point, the perspective of 'any person' who may well be whom you will wish to write your report for at the end of your fieldwork. Without keeping a record of your own struggles to get 'the knowledge' you are likely to forget the lay member's perspective once you no longer have it. Consequently you will no longer appreciate what it is that may seem odd, irrational or otherwise mysterious to those, like yourself, now in the know.

Just how long it takes to become competent in what you choose to study, and indeed whether it is possible to reach that state, will vary according to what you choose to study using this method. Should you choose to study a supermarket as a shopper or stacking the shelves as

Box 9.1 Recording observations

During an ESRC research project on the cultural role and social organisation of cafés in UK cities I spent hours with my notebook trying to bring to notice taken-for-granted features of cafés. These features I would place in square brackets, an notational device adopted from phenomenology to help suspend our familiar understandings of various words. One of the things that struck me was that particular times of days in the café showed themselves in different ways: *Staff can be present in the café but without customers the café is [empty]. What more is there to this easily recognizable state of affairs? There is: how the customer recognizes [empty] which is bound up with the typical interior architectural construction of this café, and many others like it, which allows those entering to look around as they enter and note at a glance how busy the café is. It is bound up also with the expectations of 'this early hour' of 7am in this café known for its 'appearances as usual' on a weekday at this sort of time or as an environment of expectations. By contrast, at the same time of day, an airport or flower market café is likely be full. What the customer makes of [empty] is related to their orientation to the 'awakening' of the day. That is, the reasons for empty-ness are temporally located– it is 'just opened'. A customer is not put off or curious about this observable empty-ness during the opening time, the way they would be were it to be observably empty at 1pm ('Why is it empty? Is the food bad? Are the staff rude? Is it expensive?')* (for more detail see Laurier, 2008).

a member of the staff then it is not so demanding to become competent in these activities. However, other communities of practice, such as mathematicians, dairy farmers or jazz piano players, may take considerable time and effort before you will be recognized as an accepted member of their groups. For whatever activity you decide to participate in there will be different ordinary and expert ways in which you are instructed in how to do it, from the more formal (i.e. lessons, workshops, courses, rulebooks, etc.) to the informal (tips, jokes, brief chats). For some rural villages you will always be an 'incomer' even if you reside in them until your dying day. A successful participant observation does not turn entirely on becoming *excellent* in the activity (becoming an Olympic athlete or leading cardiac surgeon) or passing as, say, a homeless Italian-American or even as a member of the opposite sex. Yet by the end you should possess a degree of the particular know-how, appropriate conduct and common knowledge of the place and/or people you have chosen to study.

Here is a brief extract where David Sudnow (1978: 82) offers a sense of what he was doing in what he called 'going for the jazz'. He had already acquired a basic competency in piano but was trying to *become* a jazz piano player, so he was, among other methods, starting to look very carefully at what the experienced players did with their body at the piano:

> At live performances I had watched the very rapid improvisation of players whose records had served as my models, but their body idioms in no way seemed connected in details to the nature of their melodies, and my occasional attempts to emulate the former had no appreciable bearing on my success with the latter. This, for example, had a little shoulder tic, but mimicking that (which I found myself doing after a night of watching him) did not make his sorts of melodies happen. Another sat tightly hunched over the

> piano, playing furiously fast, but assuming that posture seemed to have no intrinsic relationship to getting my jazz to happen as his did.

Sudnow spent a *decade* learning, first, how to play a piano; secondly, how to play jazz that was recognized by other jazz musicians as jazz; and, finally, how to instruct students in jazz piano. The above quotation gives only a hint of the experiences involved in Sudnow's odyssey. However long you devote to your study, and it's more likely to be days or weeks rather than years, what is important is to keep notes, audio-visual records and, ideally, a journal along the way. Basically, record as much as you possibly can, and even more importantly, try to write straightforward and detailed descriptions of the phenomena you are interested in. Record what you learn and can make sense of and what puzzles or upsets you in a journal and supplement those notes with photographs and film where possible. Sudnow video-taped himself playing the piano so that he could then repeatedly watch what his hands were doing on the piano keyboard in relation to the production of the music. These records will form the base materials for your commentary at the end of your time doing fieldwork. It is not impossible to write a delightful report on your participant observation without having kept a record of it at the time but it is considerably more difficult and the details will inevitably slip away. In my own research practice I try to take photographs and shoot video wherever and whenever possible. Video, in particular, provides you with a rich set of records to work with once you are writing up your research. It is a 'retrievable dataset' and reviewable to find unanticipated details that you could not formulate in words at the time, nor may even have noticed, since you were too busy being engaged in the situation. Photos and video clips are also very helpful for presenting your results to lay and expert audiences. With video, audio and still photographs you can share your data and I would strongly encourage you to do data review sessions in a group to see what different people are able to find in the visual material you are presenting them with. Note down what you all see in common and try to consider how you do so. Materials that may initially seem quite uninteresting should, by the end of their close viewing and description, provide you with surprises. Drawing conclusions and developing ideas from the materials you have gathered remains reliant on your insight.

Fieldnotes

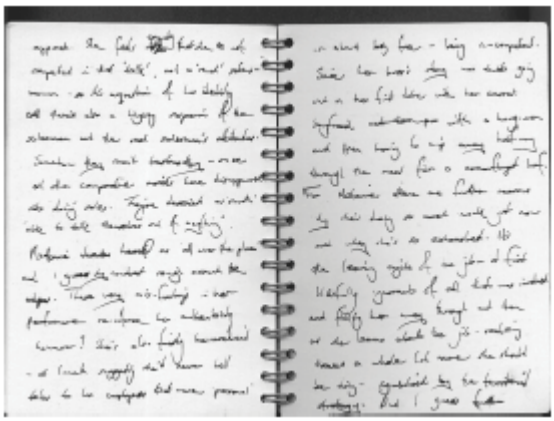
The notes in Box 9.2 were taken in the passenger seat of a company car after a conversation with a regional manager about her boss and some of her co-workers.

Fieldnotes or, rather, certainly *my* fieldnotes are often badly written, dull, cryptic and not the kind of thing I would want to show anyone. However, I have included a 'cheat' sample of a not too dire section to give you at least a flavour of how roughly notes tend to be written at the time. What is important to bear in mind is that notes should be taken because you will not be able to recall sufficient details of what happens or what people say during a lengthy engagement with them. As it happens, getting your notebook out is also quite useful in showing your researcher status in the field or setting so that you will be seen to be at work doing your research and (may) be taken seriously as a result. You should be aware that there are sensitive settings where you will want to keep your status as a researcher more low key. In such an event you may end up scribbling notes in the toilet or in the bus afterwards, or some other hidden place, and there are plenty of amusing stories from experienced ethnographers about doing so.

The notes reproduced in Box 9.2 were written up while the regional manager was out of the car dropping in to visit one of her clients.

As importantly, note-taking can help you concentrate during situations which may otherwise allow your mind to wander. The uses of note-taking to help you pay attention will, I am sure, be familiar from your use of them to do so during university lectures. To repeat myself, the most significant use of your fieldnotes will be *after the event*, in helping you recall the details of the situation which you wish to describe, analyse or reflect on. As you can see from the example of my notes they generally need to be tidied up, expanded upon and details frequently need to be filled in which will allow your jottings to be decrypted.

Box 9.2 Field notes



Transcript

. . . She feels equally that she is not competent in that 'talk', not as 'real' saleswoman – so it's a question of identity, there's also a lingering suspicion of the salesman and the real salesman's attitudes. Somehow they aren't trustworthy – once all other comparative morals have disappeared into doing sales. They're described as 'smooth', 'able to talk themselves out of anything'. M describes herself as 'all over the place' and I guess by contrast, rough around the edges. These very misfootings in her performance reinforce her authenticity however? She's also fairly hierarchical – at lunch suggesting she'd never tell tales to her employers that were personal or about losing face – being incompetent. Since her boss's story about going out on her first date with her current boyfriend – with a hangover and then having to nip away half-way through for a camouflaged barf. For M there are further reasons why she's doing so much just now and why she's so exhausted. It's the learning cycle of the job – at first blissfully ignorant of all that was involved and fluking her way through and then as she learns about the job realising there's a whole lot more she should be doing – symbolised by the territorial strategy. And I guess further . . .

Video transcripts

The video footage drawn on in Box 9.3 was taken later during another research study on pedestrian tourists' wayfinding practices. The extended transcript uses stills from the video clips to bring in elements of the visual and interactional organization of wayfinding.

Digital video records of events during fieldwork also require writing up afterwards so, even though they save you making notes at the time, you cannot escape making some notes eventually. The clips you are interest in can be imported from compact cameras (though the video quickly fills their memory), tape-based camcorders, hard-drive and solid state memory camcorders to computers that have the appropriate connectivity (USB2 or firewire). Once video is imported then, using various software packages (i.e. Quicktime, Moviemaker, Adobe Premiere, Final Cut Pro or AVID), stills can be extracted to be added to transcripts as in Box 9.3. If you are working towards multimedia documents of your research, the sequences can be kept as moving 'real time' audio-visual data and added to whatever you are constructing your media in (e.g. html, flash etc). There are plenty of technical guides to this available online and, given the rapid changes in video technology, I will not go into further technical detail on dealing with digital video. Broadly it is worth pointing out that it has been getting easier and cheaper to use and geographers have barely scratched the surface of what might be done with it for describing social practices or presenting their results.

As with using a notebook, using a camcorder makes your status as a researcher highly visible, only more so. When you switch the camera on people frequently feel obliged to make faces or talk to camera as if they were starring in a docu-soap. For instance, during the café research customers frequently made funny faces as they passed the camera (see Laurier & Philo 2006). Serious documentary makers emphasize getting the groups or individuals you wish to video familiar with the presence of the camera to the point of ignoring it and urging them to do what they would normally do were the camera not there. In fact many anthropologists hand over the camcorder and allow their communities to video themselves in an attempt to hand over control of the video-making to those being represented. In my own practice I have done both, while filming the tourists below it was Barry Brown holding the camera but in other research on social interaction in cars the cameras were handed over to the drivers and passengers of the car (Laurier et al 2008). In the clips and their accompanying transcripts I try to capture something of interaction as it happens 'naturalistically' (in contrast to experimentally or by questionnaire or interview).

Box 9.3 Video notes

Fragment 1 - Gladstone's Land

As the episode begins the group of four tourists are all standing together in a group at a crossroads trying to recall and make sense of a recommendation they have been given. The two women on the right walk away to look down a street close to where Barry is standing with the camcorder.

1 Tourist1: Maybe it's down there.

It could be down there Fran ---------->



(4.0)

2 Barry: ((to the two women standing beside him looking along the street)) Are you looking for a street?

3. Tourist1: Nooo it's a (.5) a very old house, is it Gladstone or Livingstone. (.5) Very old place. I think it's to the left of Deacon Brodie's ehh

The group of tourists begin, closely packed, all looking at the Edinburgh Old Town map in their "insight" guidebook to Scotland. In their close-knit standing arrangement they have arranged them-selves behind the guidebook with the map (Mondada forthcoming). As their inspection of the map provides no immediate solution, two of the members of the group split off, walking away to scout. Standing at a distance they can gather additional perspectives up and down the street orthogonal to where the remaining group members are standing (see Brown, 2006 for more discussion of tourist collaboration). From this we can see what tourists can do when they are a group rather than a lone traveller - they can distribute and co-ordinate the activities involved in orienting their unit.

The mapreader has rotated the guidebook so that the map is held in one of the possible matches with the cross of the junction - one aspect of a junction us that it limits you to four possible align-ments with the map. Further adjustment is required of the book, the available horizon and the group. To produce a shared orientation of left and right, up and down, in front & and behind etc.. the group has squeezed together in order to stand behind the book facing the same way. In other words, the alignment between the map and what they can see comes after their alignment with each other as pedestrians. With this side-by-side arrangement any one in the unit, on pointing, can have the potential building or sign or street they are picking out easily found by the others in the group. The alignment here then is a group alignment - standing together close, but polite, so as to see in common both the map and the city. A hand

held on the map can be raised to point toward features found to correspond with it.

***Source*:** Laurier & Brown 2008

Video clips or transcriptions with stills, as I have noted already, assist in sharing your original data. In watching video clips during data sessions we try to describe what is happening without jumping to any particular conclusions. As you can see from the example in Box 9.3, they seem in some ways obvious, yet it is the obvious that we tend to overlook precisely because it is what we take for granted. Just providing a patient attentive description of what is happening is also a first stage towards your analysis, much like tabulating the descriptive statistics from a numerical study. Unlike statistics they do not give you 'results' at this stage but are reliant at this point on your further description and analysis of what is occurring. In the example with the tourists, Barry Brown and myself were investigating how maps and guidebooks are used in real-world situations when a group of people, rather than a lone individual, are finding their way around unfamiliar places. Our aim was, through close examination of a limited set of instances, to explain what is going on when people rotate themselves or their maps while trying to work out where they are.

ADEQUATE COMMENTARIES ON CULTURE AND SOCIETY

First, an oft-quoted remark from Harvey Sacks (1992: 83) on reading his students' reports after he had sent them to do participant observation work on people exchanging glances:

> Let me make a couple of remarks about the problem of 'feigning ignorance'. I found in these papers that people [i.e. the students in his class] will occasionally say things like, 'I didn't really know what was going on, but I made the inference that he was looking at her because she's an attractive girl.' So one claims to not really know. And here's a first thought I have. I can fully well understand how you come to say that. It's part of the way in which what's called your education here gets in the way of your doing what you in fact know how to do. And you begin to call things 'concepts' and acts 'inferences', when nothing of the sort is involved. And that nothing of the sort is involved, is perfectly clear in that if it were the case that you didn't know what was going on– if you were the usual made up observer, the man from Mars – then the question of what you would see would be a far more obscure matter than that she was an attractive girl, perhaps. How would you go about seeing in the first place that one was looking at the other, seeing what they were looking at, and locating those features which are perhaps relevant?

The warning Sacks is making to his students is not to exercise a kind of professional scepticism ('feigning ignorance') which subverts the intelligibility of the things and actions they are able to observe. In this case a guy checking out an attractive girl. Sacks is warning of the dangers of acting like a Martian who has landed in a city and is without the myriad methods and experiences we have for making sense of our local environment. Moreover Sacks

is saying that what we see in any setting is tied to the fact that we are participants and that there are classifications that we *are* able to make almost instantly and definitely pre-theoretically as part of our natural attitude to the world. In doing participant observation of places we are already competent inhabitants of and can take their appearance for granted, the solution to doing adequate descriptions of them is not to import strange labels for the things we see or hear or otherwise sense almost instantly. It is the categories that the locals do and would use to describe their observations that we are interested in.

If you are a 'local' already you have huge advantages in providing adequate descriptions of how and why things get done in the way they get done. Yet you are also at the disadvantage of no longer noticing how such things get done because they are so familiar as to be *seen but unnoticed* and you may never have attempted to make them into any kind of formal description (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1986). The exercise Sacks set his students is one that you might also 'try at home without supervision' (see Exercise 9.1).

EXERCISE 9.1

In a public place such as a busy street, university library or park, set yourself down with a notebook, camera or camcorder. Watch the people there and look for exchanges of glances between people who are not otherwise interacting with one another. Write notes at the time and afterwards if you have video to re-view and check your observations. The notes are to be on what kind of persons exchange glances with what kinds of second (or third persons). Try to consider what kinds of actions take place during exchanges: recognition, snubs, reprimands, warnings, challenges, thanks. Can exchanged glances be hostile? Friendly? Flirty? Defensive? And if so, how so?

After gathering your observations they can be further described and analysed in order for you to consider the social categories you have used. For instance, that a 'well dressed woman' exchanged 'friendly' glances with a 'mother and baby', or that a 'teenage girl avoided the glance of another teenage boy'. What you will start to show in your analysis is something of what you know and use already to make sense of your everyday life. Moreover, if you carry out this exercise you should start to get a grasp on how it is that we use glances and how you are able to see what someone else sees. That is, you can see what it is they are looking at, not so much from working out the exact focus of their look but by seeing what it is in the scene that they would glance at or who they would exchange glances with (i.e. a beggar lying in a doorway, two dog owners, a kid on a scooter). This exercise is done with a minimum level of participation by you as a researcher and a minimum level of disruption to the place you are investigating. While easy to do, the test is to get a really good description done that makes available how glancing works as a social and cultural activity. Your description will be adequate when you show some parts of how glancing works in the particular observations you have in hand. This exercise in doing a participant observation is illustrative of a broad type of participant observations, which are those of our common or everyday life-world.

Things will be slightly different if you have pursued participant observations of new and uncommon sets of skills such as mathematical proving, walking a police officer's beat (Sacks, 1972), learning mountaineering, nursing the dying, living among the homeless on the streets (Rose et al., 1965), dropping in at a drop-in centre for the mentally ill (Parr, 2000) or concierges maintaining high rise buildings (Strebel forthcoming). From these more

practically ambitious projects, as I suggested earlier, your adequacy as a commentator turns on you having learnt things which lay members and indeed geographers cannot be expected to know. This certainly makes delivering 'news' easier since unlike 'exchanging glances' or 'answering the telephone' or 'buying a newspaper', not everyone knows how these more obscure, expert, secret or exotic activities are done. Not everyone could tell whether what you were saying about these activities indicated that you really know what you were talking about or whether it was sense or nonsense. For that reason you should consider testing the veracity of your descriptions on the people they were purported to represent.

Competence in the particular field you have selected will be one way in which your comments will attain a reasonable degree of adequacy. You yourself and other competent members like you will be able to see your comments as closely tied to the activities they are describing. Ideally you will be able to show some things that are in many ways known already but have simply never been closely described and analysed before. Doing adequate descriptions is already a challenge but in this second case is certainly no easy matter. It will be additionally hard because you will be trying to write or speak to two different audiences: towards the more abstract concerns of human geographers and other researchers and, just as importantly, writing for and as a member of the group you are describing.

RESULTS: RESPECIFYING THE GENERALITIES OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

Human geography, like most other social sciences, has a host of classic topics such as power, class, race, identity and landscape. If, like Charles Darwin, your 'power to follow a long and purely abstract train of thought is very limited' then these classic topics may not best be pursued as purely theoretical matters. As big-picture issues they sit uncomfortably with the more modest and small-picture concerns of actually doing a participant observation. Are you really going to resolve disputes that have dogged the social sciences for a century from your study of a drop-in centre? Perhaps not, but you may be able to respecify what appear to be overpowering abstract problems into worldly, ordinary practical problems.

And what might your results look like? Your results should be ones that you could *not* have guessed from the big topics. Nor should you have been able to imagine them before doing your study, or else why bother going to have a look if you can work it out without ever consulting anything in the world? Darwin's methods were to pay close attention to animals in all kinds of places, including his pets at home, and observe them in extended detail in ways and to ends that had not been pursued before. Despite their quite ordinary non-technical provenance, Darwin's patient observations of animal life overturned our view of ourselves, our origins and our relation to nature and God. Now *that* is a result. But what has been made of his work should not be confused with the actual lowly and lengthy observations he documented that ended up being drawn into these larger conflicts. His 'results' were mostly descriptions, alongside sketches and still photographs, interspersed with reiterations of longstanding problems in biology and zoology and occasional bursts of inspiration and insight.

The strengths of participant observation are, hopefully, quite clear by now in that it is easy to do and it provides a more direct access to phenomena than some of the more complex methodologies of social science. It allows you to build detailed descriptions from the ground up that should be recognizable to the groups whose lives you have entered into. Its limits are that it does not have a handle that you can turn to make results pop out. Nor can it be shoe-horned in as a replacement for statistical methods since it will provide only very weak answers to the kinds of questions that could be hypothesis tested.

The kind of evidence that arises out of a one-off description allows your study to bring into view certain types of phenomena that are too complex for methodologies that seek and detect general features. Good data from a participant observation can be, and usually are, a particular instance of some practice or event or feature that elicits your interest. Sometimes the instance is an exception to the rule that teaches you the rule such as when someone does a foot fault at Wimbledon. At that moment you discover a rule in the game of tennis that you never knew before. It is not a well-known nor commonly broken rule but it is there in the game. Sometimes an instance is simply one that you find recurring all the time, such as in the video notes example from earlier. Groups of tourists rotate themselves and their maps all the time to find their way. Looking at one instance of it revealed methods that tourists commonly use when they are in unfamiliar environments. If you consider that in each and every place the locals have at hand just what they need, then and there, to produce locally the spatial phenomena and interactional events you are observing, then it becomes apparent that wherever you start there is material for your analysis.

There is no need for you to climb a ladder to get a view nobody else has. As Wittgenstein (1980) remarks:

> I might say: if the place I want to get to could only be reached by a ladder, I would give up trying to get there. For the place I really have to get to is a place I must already be at now. Anything I might reach by climbing a ladder does not interest me.

FINAL WORDS OF ADVICE

It is with a mild hint of self-irony that my finishing words are: avoid reading books which claim to describe ‘how to do’ participant observation. If you must, read just the one and then throw it away afterwards. A preparatory way to learn how this kind of fieldwork is done, if you cannot get hold of someone else who has done participant observation already, is to read an actual study which has been based in participant observation (see the further reading at the end of the chapter). None of these is a substitute for doing a study yourself. Much like learning to play the piano or work out a mathematical proof or describe what a strawberry tastes like, you have to take a bite. Being told how playing the piano or mathematical proving or tasting fruit is done, in a book, does not and cannot provide what you need to know. Participant observation is not difficult, nor obscure, though the topics, places, people, subjects and more to which you apply it may be. Since it acquires the shape and scale of its phenomena, in your first studies choose things you reckon you can handle.

Summary

- Participant observation is a simple skill of doing and watching that we all do as part of our everyday lives without realizing it.
- It is important to participate as well as just observe.
- This approach can be applied to new places and practices but can also be used to make visible familiar places and practices.
- As a participant observer you need to keep written fieldnotes and/ or video notes of your research.
- The data collected need to be analysed like other empirical material and can be used to understand and make sense of more abstract problems.

Further reading

The following books and articles provide good examples of participant observation in practice:

- Crang (1994) is an example of participant observation used to examine how a waiter's work gets done and how looking closely at this work teaches us about surveillance and display in workplaces.
- Goffman (1961) is a classic from a very readable author, by turns thought-provoking, amusing and disturbing. It is not just geographers who have found this book of value; it is a key text on many courses in sociology, social psychology, psychiatric nursing and doctoring.
- Harper et al. (2000) is based on two of the authors spending time working alongside the employees of new telephone-banking facilities and traditional banks and building societies. This study shows how participant observation can be carried out in a business environment.
- Livingston (1987) is a very accessible and practical introduction to what is a sometimes puzzling and certainly distinctive approach in the social sciences which heavily utilizes participant observation.
- Sudnow (1978). Mentioned earlier in the main text, this book was a best-seller when released and is read by both academics and musicians. In addition, if you can play the piano then it can be used as a tutorial in the basics of jazz. For those unfamiliar with playing music, some sections will be hard to grasp since it relies on a basic knowledge of notation, chords, etc.
- Wieder (1974). Based on the author's residence as a researcher in a halfway house for ex-convicts, this study illuminates how the 'convict's code' is used as a device for making sense of and producing events at the halfway house. It provides a good basis for seeing how a particular place and its inhabitants organize their everyday lives.

Note: Full details of the above can be found in the references list below.

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