

Participant Observation

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The participant observation means watching the events or situation or activities from inside by taking part in the group to be observed. The researcher freely interacts with the other group members, participates in various activities of the group, and studies their behaviour or other activities not as an outsider but by becoming a member of that group. So in this kind of observation the observer has to stay as a member in the group he wants to study.

For the success of participant observation it is essential that the respondents being studied should not have any doubt about the intention of the research worker. A fruitful result of participant observation is very much dependent upon the resourcefulness, tactfulness, and personality manners of the research worker.

Advantages of Participant Observation:

- Observation of natural behaviour:

The natural behaviour of the respondent can be studied by participant observation. When a group knows that they are going to be observed by a stranger, they feel conscious, uncomfortable and therefore neutrality in their behaviour and activity is lost. But in case of the participant observation, the respondents do not know that they are being observed. So their behaviour is not constrained by the conscious feeling of being observed by a stranger.

- Closeness with the group:

In participant observation, the observer has a very good rapport with the respondents. He has a very close primary relationship with the group members. Because of this he can participate in all activities from a close angle and thus can better interpret the situation than a non-participant observer.

- Better Understanding:

In participant observation the observer can better understand the feeling of the respondents than an outsider. For example, a person who is actually living in a slum area can realise the feeling and hardship of the slum dwellers in a better way than an outsider.

- Participation provides opportunity to learn more about an event:

The chief advantage of participant observation is that in it the observer gets an opportunity to interact with the group regarding various activities of them. He can thus learn the significance of these activities that are actually not open for observation. For example, if an observer participates in a religious ceremony of a tribe, he can not only observe different aspects of the ceremony but also clear his doubt by asking various questions to the group members or learn more about that ceremony by discussing with the group in this regard.

Disadvantages of Participant Observation:

The following are the disadvantages of the participant observation:

- Lack of objectivity:

By becoming members of a group and participating very closely in it, the observer may lose his objectivity. His emotional and sentimental association with the group kills his impartiality and unbiased analysis. He may develop some biasness for that group and because of this.

- Often close association brings biased interpretation:

Because of his close association and emotional participation with the group members the researcher creates a special position for himself in that group. He may be influenced or pleased by this and begins to support them blindly. Due to this he observes the things from his own personal point of view rather than scientific point of view.

- Misses important issues due to familiarity:

Due to much familiarity many crucial events appear to the participant observer as of little or no significance. Therefore, he misses many of the important issues. But a stranger pays much attention even to a small thing, as this appears new to him.

- Involvement in groupism:

The active participation and proximity of the observer with the group may involve him in quarrels and group factionalism. He cannot avoid taking side of one faction. But if he does so, he loses his status as an impartial observer whom everybody is ready to co-operate. So it destroys the very purpose of the research and the researcher finds it very difficult to get proper information from the group.

- Limits of participant observation:

There are certain situations in which the participant observation is not possible. For example, it is not possible to observe criminals or prisoners.