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Participant Observation and Geographical Research

Whatever definition of human geography we subscribe to, ultimately we will find ourselves examining and attempting to explain geographical arrangements of man and his products. Yet such spatial arrangements are the outcome of locational behaviors which are in their turn the products of human locational decisions. . . . To explain the spatial arrangements which we encounter in human geography, then, we need assumptions, postulates and deductions regarding how human beings decide and consequently behave with respect to the environment.

—Kevin Cox (1974, 21)

. . . in the larger view we know that attitudes and beliefs cannot be excluded . . . because man is, in fact, the ecological dominant and his behavior needs to be understood in depth, not merely mapped.

—Yi-Fu Tuan (1974, 21)

Although speaking from different perspectives, Tuan and Cox make the same point: the geographer must ultimately plumb the human actor to explain the cultural landscape. The cogency of this point is amply demonstrated by the last two decades' rapid growth of behavioral, perceptual, and humanistic geography. Increasingly, geographers focus their attention on the man in the man/land relationship (Downs and Stea, 1973, 1977; Moore and Golledge, 1976; Porteous, 1977; Saarinen, 1976; Buttimer, 1976; Entikin, 1976; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1976, 1977).

One noteworthy method for studying the human actor, especially in situ, is participant observation. Not only does it possess a well-developed literature (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975; McCall and Simmons, 1969; Schatzman and Strauss, 1973), and a demonstrated usefulness (examples of special interest to urban/social geographers include Gans, 1962; Howell, 1973; Lewis, 1959, 1965, 1969; Liebow, 1967; Stack, 1974; Whyte, 1955; Young and Willmott, 1962), but also it grafts readily onto an accepted geographical field tradition. J. K. Wright clearly reflected geography's traditional use of an informal version of participant observation.

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observation when he described the geographer’s method of probing psychological “terrae incognitae”:

By talking sympathetically with a few intelligent folk on the ground, by consulting the files of local newspapers and other publications and by a little adept use of intuition we may, under most circumstances, gain all that is required for our purposes (Wright, 1947).

Notwithstanding this informal use, however, most geographers remain rather naive regarding the rigorous application of participant observation.

In rigorous participant observation, notes must be assiduously recorded in a systematic fashion; a sophisticated knowledge of intra- and inter-personal processes and relationships must be applied; one’s imagination must be strenuously engaged in order to achieve empathic understanding; listening must be sensitive and creative; data must be constantly cross-validated; time and space must be carefully sampled; both informants and oneself must be constantly pushed—without overstepping—to achieve the deepest possible understanding of situations; everything must be aggressively evaluated as data; analysis and the formulation of new hypotheses must be conscientiously interlaced with data collection; and so on. Systematic participant observation is far from a casual or peripheral enterprise which yields only supplementary “anecdotal data.” It is both exhaustive and exhausting. However, the rewards are great.

My purpose here is simply to increase the geographer’s awareness of participant observation and to advocate the method’s use in geographical research. The discussion will briefly introduce participant observation, outline and comment on its advantages and disadvantages, and present several examples of the method’s geographical application.

**Participant Observation**

To know yet to think that one does not know is best; Not to know yet to think that one knows will lead to difficulty. It is by being alive to difficulty that one can avoid it. —Lao Tzu, c. 6th century B.C. (1963, 133)

What distinguishes participant observation and all qualitative methods from other methodologies is that the participant observer’s questions are framed in general terms. . . . To enter a setting with a set of hypotheses is to impose preconceptions and perhaps misconceptions on the setting.

—Robert Bogdan and Steven J. Taylor (1975, 26-27)

An ancient wisdom lies at the heart of participant observation: at every instant be an open gate. The history of participant observation involves the attempts of social scientists to combine scientific
rigor with humanistic sensitivity and openness. This is, of course, no simple matter. However, in the last century, anthropology and sociology have successfully developed a field method that approaches this ideal.

Beginning in the latter part of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century, what we now call participant observation became accepted in both sociology and anthropology, although for some reason sociology accepted the technique more slowly (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 3-4). The method has enjoyed relatively consistent popularity in anthropology and now serves as the discipline's principal field technique.

In sociology, participant observation's popularity has vacillated somewhat (Bogdan and Taylor, 1974, 3-4). The qualitative orientation of the early twentieth-century Chicago School of sociologists helped to produce a period from 1920 to 1940 during which "students of society" relied heavily on participant observation and other qualitative techniques. Then, during the 1940s and 1950s, the tide of positivism and quantitative methods overwhelmed the ostensibly less nomothetic qualitative methods. The 1960s and 1970s have witnessed a resurgence of participant observation, due in part to methodological analysts such as Glaser and Strauss, who have demonstrated the potential of qualitative methods for generating theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

The literature advises us not to view participant observation as a single technique but rather, as McCall and Simmons put it, as "a type of research enterprise, a style of combining several methods toward a particular end" (McCall and Simmons, 1969, 3). These methods often include: 1) direct participation; 2) informant interviewing; 3) respondent interviewing;* 4) simple observation;** and 5) document analysis (McCall and Simmons, 1969, 26).

Although participant observation frequently benefits from simple observation (such as systematic counting), and from document analysis (such as examining newspapers, censuses, and letters), the method's essential ingredient comprises the researcher's various roles as a direct participant and interviewer. The

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**"Respondents" and "informants" differ according to the information they convey to the researcher. An informant serves as a "surrogate observer" who recounts events in the field which, for whatever reason, the researcher did not observe, whereas a respondent relates his own behavior and perspective to the researcher. Informant interviewing puts the person interviewed in the role of a "substitute scientist-observer," whereas respondent interviewing casts him in "the role of himself, reporting only his own behavior and thoughts" (McCall and Simmons, 1969, 4).

*I have substituted "simple observation" for McCall and Simmons' phrase "direct observation" because it seems more expressive of the type of observation that involves minimal researcher interaction.

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sociologists Bogdan and Taylor emphasize this aspect of participant observation in their working definition of the method:

[Participant observation] is used here to refer to research characterized by a period of intense social interaction between the researcher and the subjects, in the milieu of the latter. During this period, data are unobtrusively and systematically collected (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 5);

as do sociologists Becker and Geer:

By participant observation we mean that method in which the observer participates in the daily life of the people under study, either openly in the role of researcher or covertly in some disguised role, observing things that happen, listening to what is said, and questioning people, over some length of time (Becker and Geer, 1969, 322).

Anthropologists may survey the material culture in a community study—counting radios, articles of clothing, cooking utensils, and religious artifacts—but like natural sociologists, in order to make sense of their tallies, they rely primarily on information garnered through their field interactions (such as Lewis, 1970).

The participant observer directs himself primarily toward understanding the field setting from the various perspectives of the setting’s human actors; empathetic understanding is the goal (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975; McCall and Simmons, 1969; Schatzman and Strauss, 1973). Empathy may be defined as:

. . . the self-conscious effort to share and accurately comprehend the presumed consciousness of another person, including his thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and muscular tensions, as well as their causes (Wise, 1968; also see Katz, 1963; Bennett, 1972, 3, 61, 109; Stotland et al., 1978, 7-8, 11-13, 16).

Katz divides the empathic process into four phases: 1) identification—the projection of one’s creative imagination (not some aspect of oneself, as in Freudian projection) into the experience of another person; 2) incorporation—the internalization of this imagining; 3) reverberation—the interplay between one’s own experience and the facsimile of the other person’s experience (this is what gives real life to the latter); and 4) detachment—the rational assessment of the empathic experience (Katz, 1963). Obviously, one’s success at empathy is aided by an openness to others, sensitive observation, a good imagination, a wealth of experience, and the ability for self analysis. Although some people are naturally better at empathy than others, empathic skills can be learned and improved through disciplined practice. For many mental health professionals, empathy is an assiduously developed clinical tool.

No infallible verification method exists for empathic understanding. However, a wide variety of cross-checks is possible. One can question the other person at the time; check the empathic understanding with later experiences with that person; compare the
empathic understanding of a similar person; ask a colleague for his or her understanding; or try to predict an individual's future behavior based on the empathic understanding and compare the prediction with what actually happens. Cross-checking is essential in participant observation, and the longer one stays in the field, the greater the opportunities. This is one reason why considerable field contact is sometimes included in a definition of participant observation (Becker and Geer, 1969, 322).

Advantages and Disadvantages

Like any field method, participant observation has its strengths and weaknesses. Criticisms of participant observation commonly include: 1) that it can incorporate distortion due to researcher impact on the field setting (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 12); 2) that because the researcher uses his own judgment to select samples, and because the researcher functions as the primary data collection instrument, participant observation is vulnerable to researcher bias (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 12); 3) that participant observation does not prove assertions—i.e., demonstrate assertions statistically—because of its small purposive samples and lack of standardized data—i.e., quantitative data (Dean, Eichhorn, and Dean, 1969, 20-22; Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 12; Gans, 1962, 347-350); and 4) that without ethical care, publication of participant observation's intimate data can seriously damage the lives of those studied (Becker, 1969; Rainwater and Pittman, 1969).

The first criticism, concerning researcher impact, applies to all field methods where the researcher, or his data collection instrument, actually interacts with the people being studied. This includes surveying, questionnaire interviewing, unstructured interviewing, and various types of observation. Only nonreactive methods have immunity (Webb et al., 1966). Of all the methods in which the researcher enters the field setting, participant observation probably allows the researcher the greatest flexibility in recognizing and adjusting for his impact (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 12-13; Dean, Eichhorn, and Dean, 1969, 22).

The second criticism, concerning researcher bias, also applies to many field methods in addition to participant observation. When a researcher chooses a particular scaling technique for a survey instrument, or even when he initially selects the survey as the appropriate instrument, he introduces his bias as to the nature of the field setting. Participant observation allows constant checking and adjusting of one's notions of the field setting, rather than locking them in until the study's completion (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 12, 26-27; Dean, Eichhorn, and Dean, 1969, 22-23).
The third criticism, that participant observation does not statistically verify its conclusions, presumes that all aspects of social living can be quantified. This is untenable, of course. Many aspects of everyday life—probably the most important, such as beliefs, meanings, values, and emotions—strongly resist quantification. To understand participant observation’s use of small samples (that is, concentration on a few or one field setting, and on a relatively small number of significant individuals), one must recognize that the method aspires to a more complex and direct understanding than numbers yield, and that the time and rapport required to attain this understanding often limits sample sizes (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 12; Dean, Eichhorn, and Dean, 1969, 22-23).

The fourth criticism, damage from publication of intimate data, should give pause to every participant observer. It need not paralyze him, however. It should simply require that he think through his ethical system, and then play fair as he defines fairness (Rainwater and Pittman, 1969; Becker, 1969; Foster, 1969, 173-179; Society for Applied Anthropology, 1963-1964, 237). A great deal of good can result from intimacy, as well as enormous harm. Clearly, the mere threat of harm should not confine research to superficiality.

Participant observation has a number of important advantages. In brief summary, they include the following: 1) participant observation produces data that express the complexities of everyday life, thereby helping to avoid oversimplification and irrelevancies and facilitating the consideration of variables that resist quantification (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 13; Dean, Eichhorn, and Dean, 1969, 22-23; Gans, 1962, 347-348, 350); 2) participant observation yields intimate, or empathic understanding of individual and group perspectives (Dean and Whyte, 1969; Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 5, 8-11; Dean, Eichhorn, and Dean, 1969, 23); 3) it allows the researcher the flexibility to assess and control for his or her impact on the field setting (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 12; Dean, Eichhorn, and Dean, 1969, 22); 4) through its flexibility, and its simultaneous data collection and analysis, participant observation allows the researcher to make important conceptual and methodological adjustments in the field (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 26-27; Dean, Eichhorn, and Dean, 1969, 22-23); and 5) participant observation has the potential for covert research (Dean, Eichhorn, and Dean, 1969, 23).

**Participant Observation and Geography**

Underlying what I am trying to say is the conviction that [the discipline] . . . is first of all knowledge gained by observation, that one orders by reflection and reinspection the things one has been looking at, and that from what one has experienced by intimate sight come comparison and synthesis.
The more energy that goes into recording predetermined categories, the less likelihood there is of exploration.

The categories are apt to become master of the observer, depressing and limiting his observations to predetermined routine. Routine may bring the euphoria of daily accomplishment as filling in blank area; but the more energy that goes into recording the less is left for the interplay of observation and reflection.

Oddly enough, these are not the thoughts of a natural sociologist or an anthropologist but, rather, of a geographer named Carl Sauer (1963, 400, 402). Although Sauer certainly was not speaking for all geographers, the idea of going into the field with a general theme and exploring freely for a multi-faceted, detailed, and direct understanding is an old tradition in geography (for perspective, see Hartsorne, 1959; James, 1972). It is to this tradition that participant observation appeals.

Geographers frequently make casual use of participant observation, as almost any human geography that involves fieldwork will illustrate. However, because the method has rarely served as the geographer's principal field technique, knowledge of it in the discipline as a rigorous enterprise remains rather superficial.

This is unfortunate since participant observation adapts readily to geographical research. To apply it, the geographer needs simply explore his traditional environmental themes within the complex, everyday context of individual lives and social settings.

For example, to study human circulation patterns in the city, the participant observer would select representative individuals and study them in depth. One would travel with them on their daily rounds; construct a detailed record of their travel patterns; participate with them in a variety of circumstances in order to obtain perspective on their various behaviors; and probe constantly for pertinent meanings, values, and attitudes. In the end, one would produce case studies that would yield rich analytic description and understanding. The degree to which valid generalizations could be developed would depend on how representative the subjects were. Sometimes the representativeness could be demonstrated; sometimes it could not. Whatever the case, thoughtful, detailed investigations would almost always contribute productive hypotheses regarding a general problem.

Locational analysis, another common geographical problem, could entail a similar treatment. The participant observer would focus on the individual decision makers, once again selecting representative subjects. If the interest were in the location of new housing tracts, then one might gain access to a carefully selected land development corporation and study its decision makers first...
hand, in context. By collecting a variety of data under a variety of circumstances, one would explore a broad spectrum of issues, such as the relative importance of environmental considerations in such decisions, the environmental perceptions of an important category of decision makers, the relationship between environmental attitudes and environmental decisions, the extent to which such locational decisions appear to follow a standardized procedure and are therefore predictable, and so forth. Once again, one would produce for a specific case a description and explanation which, if that case be well selected, would translate into important general hypotheses.

The geographer could also apply participant observation to the study of specific small-scale locations such as parks, plazas, or neighborhoods. One could anchor oneself in a place and participate with the various people who appear there, as well as explore outside the location in order to put it in the perspective of a superordinate spatial system. One would describe and explain with some intimacy the human components of that location: who appears there, when, what they do there, why, and so on. Again, at the very least, the research would produce a detailed case study, and at best, insightful generalizations.

**Conclusion**

Rigorous participant observation is not difficult to apply in geography, nor is it alien to geographical tradition. Increasing use of the method would establish in geography an important alternative to the present quantitative, literary, and philosophical approaches to the human actor.

In particular, participant observation would provide a field method for the growing number of human geographers with a phenomenological or experiential perspective. They have no field method at present. Speculative work in this area could then taper off, and anxiously awaited field studies could begin to accumulate.

Using participant observation is nothing radically new or daring. It is simply the appropriate application of a proven field method now that we have the need.

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