

# How to do a participant observation?

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according to Spradley (1980) and Bryman (2004)

by Basanta Thapa

# Agenda

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1. What is participant observation?
2. Conceptual questions
3. How to:
  1. observation strategies
  2. field notes
  3. analysis

# What is participant observation?

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- ▶ observing a social situation while being part of said social situation
- ▶ watch, listen, feel – keep records

# Ordinary observation vs. participant observation

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1. dual purpose
2. explicit awareness
3. wide-angle lens
4. insider/outsider experience
5. introspection
6. record keeping

# Goal of participant observation

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- ▶ in general:  
directly observe practices
  
- ▶ as part of ethnography:  
identify *cultural patterns* and *tacit rules of behavior*  
in a social situation

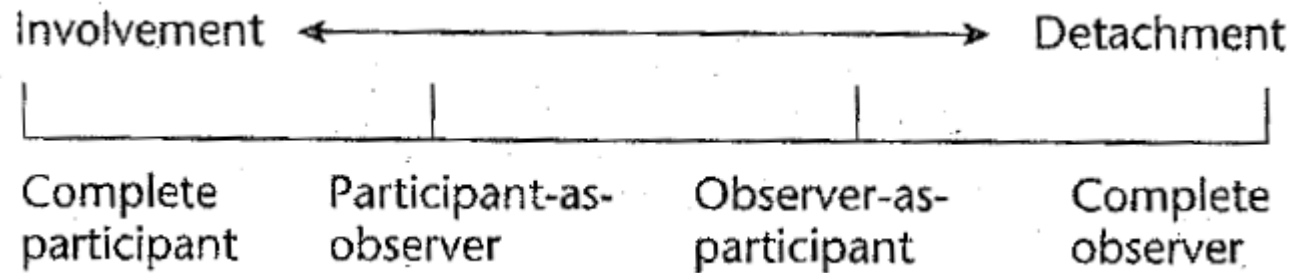
# Ethnography vs. participant observation

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- ▶ ethnography as a research strategy
  - ▶ methods:
    - ▶ interviews
    - ▶ document/artefact analysis
    - ▶ participant observation
    - ▶ surveys
    - ▶ ...

# Types of observation

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- ▶ „...the more you know about a situation as an ordinary participant, the more difficult it is to study it as an ethnographer.“
- ▶ danger of „going native“

# Access & key informants

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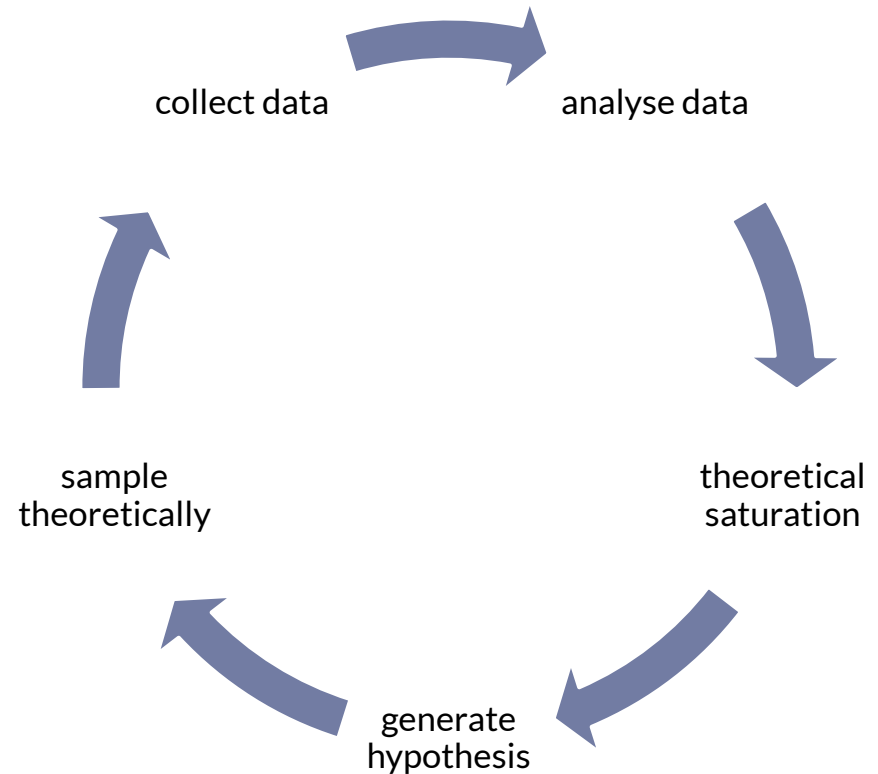
- ▶ access for participant observation can be hard to gain
- ▶ trust is a central issue
- ▶ key informants both helpful and problematic for research



# Sampling

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- ▶ Sample mostly preset by access
- ▶ When have I collected enough data?
  - ▶ cycle of theoretical sampling
  - ▶ remember: usually qualitative research



# Observation strategies

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- ▶ *ideal*: observe everything and everyone at the same time
- ▶ *practical*:
  - ▶ grand tour – look major features
  - ▶ mini-tours – look at smaller unit of experience
  - ▶ Repetition is good!

# Question-observation

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- ▶ What to look at? *Am I looking at the right things?*
  1. Space
  2. Actor
  3. Activity
  4. Object
  5. Act
  6. Event
  7. Time
  8. Goal
  9. Feeling

Descriptive Question Matrix

	SPACE	OBJECT	ACT	ACTIVITY
SPACE	Can you describe in detail all the <i>places</i> ?	What are all the ways space is organized by objects?	What are all the ways space is organized by acts?	What are all the ways space is organized by activities?
OBJECT	Where are objects located?	Can you describe in detail all the <i>objects</i> ?	What are all the ways objects are used in acts?	What are all the ways objects are used in activities?
ACT	Where do acts occur?	How do acts incorporate the use of objects?	Can you describe in detail all the <i>acts</i> ?	How are acts a part of activities?
ACTIVITY	What are all the places activities occur?	What are all the ways activities incorporate objects?	What are all the ways activities incorporate acts?	Can you describe in detail all the <i>activities</i> ?
EVENT	What are all the places events occur?	What are all the ways events incorporate objects?	What are all the ways events incorporate acts?	What are all the ways events incorporate activities?
TIME	Where do time periods occur?	What are all the ways time affects objects?	How do acts fall into time periods?	How do activities fall into time periods?
ACTOR	Where do actors place themselves?	What are all the ways actors use objects?	What are all the ways actors use acts?	How are actors involved in activities?
GOAL	Where are goals sought and achieved?	What are all the ways goals involve use of objects?	What are all the ways goals involve acts?	What activities are goal seeking or linked to goals?
FEELING	Where do the various feeling states occur?	What feelings lead to the use of what objects?	What are all the ways feelings affect acts?	What are all the ways feelings affect activities?

EVENT	TIME	ACTOR	GOAL	FEELING
What are all the ways space is organized by events?	What spatial changes occur over time?	What are all the ways space is used by actors?	What are all the ways space is related to goals?	What places are associated with feelings?
What are all the ways that objects are used in events?	How are objects used at different times?	What are all the ways objects are used by actors?	How are objects used in seeking goals?	What are all the ways objects evoke feelings?
How are acts a part of events?	How do acts vary over time?	What are the ways acts are performed by actors?	What are all the ways acts are related to goals?	What are all the ways acts are linked to feelings?
What are all the ways activities are part of events?	How do activities vary at different times?	What are all the ways activities involve actors?	What are all the ways activities involve goals?	How do activities involve feelings?
Can you describe in detail all the <i>events</i> ?	How do events occur over time? Is there any sequencing?	How do events involve the various actors?	How are events related to goals?	How do events involve feelings?
How do events fall into time periods?	Can you describe in detail all the <i>time periods</i> ?	When are all the times actors are "on stage"?	How are goals related to time periods?	When are feelings evoked?
How are actors involved in events?	How do actors change over time or at different times?	Can you describe in detail all the <i>actors</i> ?	Which actors are linked to which goals?	What are the feelings experienced by actors?
What are all the ways events are linked to goals?	Which goals are scheduled for which times?	How do the various goals affect the various actors?	Can you describe in detail all the <i>goals</i> ?	What are all the ways goals evoke feelings?
What are all the ways feelings affect events?	How are feelings related to various time periods?	What are all the ways feelings involve actors?	What are the ways feelings influence goals?	Can you describe in detail all the <i>feelings</i> ?

# Fieldnotes

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- ▶ condensed notes & headnotes
- ▶ (photos, videos, audio recordings, documents/artefacts)
- ▶ expanded account
- ▶ fieldwork journal
- ▶ analysis & interpretation

# Language use

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- ▶ Concrete Principle
- ▶ Verbatim Principle
- ▶ Language Identification Principle
  - ▶ Keep observation and interpretation separate!

# Analysis

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- ▶ description-led and question-led
- ▶ Look for patterns and connections among domains.
- ▶ Keep the researcher in the picture.
  - ▶ fieldwork journal

# Disclaimer

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- ▶ no set rules for participant observation
- ▶ no set rules how to write an ethnography
- ▶ Find what works for you.
- ▶ Try to keep it scientific.



# Questions?

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