PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND THE COLLECTION
AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

ARTHUR J. VIDICH

ABSTRACT

The social role of the participant observer and the images which respondents have of him have a decisive influence on the character of the data collected. In this light the tactical situations of conformity or non-conformity and identification, or the lack of it, with groups, causes, or issues are to be re-evaluated, as are also problems connected with the formulation of prearranged categories, the imputation of motives, the study of social change, and the validation of data.

The practical and technical problems as well as many of the advantages and disadvantages of participant observation as a data-gathering technique have been well stated. We propose to discuss some of the effects on data of the social position of the participant observer. The role of the participant observer and the images which respondents hold of him are central to the definition of his social position; together these two factors shape the circumstances under which he works and the type of data he will be able to collect.

In a broad sense the social position of the observer determines what he is likely to see. The way in which he sees and interprets his data will be largely conditioned by his theoretical preconceptions, but this is a separate problem with which we will not be concerned.

What an observer will see will depend largely on his particular position in a network of relationships. To the extent that this is the case, this discussion of relatively well-known but frequently unstated observations is not purely academic. The task assumes the necessity of less concern with methodological refinements for handling data after they are collected and more concern with establishing canons of validity and the need, too, for a better balance between the standardization of field techniques and the establishment of standards for the evaluation of field data according to their source and the collector.

BROADER RELEVANCE OF PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

As a technique, participant observation is central to all the social sciences. It has been singled out and treated as a rather specialized field approach with peculiar problems of its own, but this has obscured the extent to which the various social sciences depend upon it. Participant observation enables the research worker to secure his data within the mediums, symbols, and experiential worlds which have meaning to his respondents. Its intent is to prevent imposing alien meanings upon the actions of the subjects. Anthropologists dealing with cultures other than their own have consciously recog-


2 Oscar Lewis has devoted considerable attention to this problem. See especially his Life in a Mexican Village: Tezozol Anabated (Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 1951) and "Controls and Experiments in Field Work," in Kroeber et al. (eds.), Anthropology Today, pp. 452-75.
nized and utilized the technique as a matter of necessity. Experimental psychologists who try their own instruments out on themselves as well as psychiatrists who undergo analysis are practicing a form of participant observation for much the same purpose as the anthropologist.

The sociologist who limits his work to his own society is constantly exploiting his personal background of experience as a basis of knowledge. In making up structured interviews, he draws on his knowledge of meanings gained from participation in the social order he is studying. He can be assured of a modicum of successful communication only because he is dealing in the same language and symbolic system as his respondents. Those who have worked with structured techniques in non-Western societies and languages will attest to the difficulty encountered in adjusting their meanings to the common meanings of the society investigated, a fact which highlights the extent to which the sociologist is a participant observer in almost all his work.\(^8\)

In view of this widespread dependence upon participant observation as a source of data and as a basis for giving them meaning, a discussion of the factors which condition data obtained by this method is warranted.

Our source of immediate experience is the Springdale community of Upstate New York.\(^4\) Experience as a participant observer in one's own culture sets the major problems of this technique into clearer focus. The objectification and self-analysis of the role of the participant observer in one's own society has the advantage that communication is in the same language and symbolic system.

**FORMATION OF RESPONDENT IMAGES OF THE PARTICIPANT OBSERVER**

Whether the field worker is totally, partially, or not at all disguised, the respondent forms an image of him and uses that image as a basis of response. Without such an image the relationship between the field worker and the respondent, by definition, does not exist.

The essential thing in any field situation is the assumption of some position in a structure of relationships. The position is assumed not only by various types of participant observers but by all interviewers. The undisguised interviewer establishes his personal identity or the identity of the organization he works for and, hence, makes himself and the questions he asks plausible to his respondent. In disguised interviewing, including that of the totally disguised participant observer, a plausible role is no less important even though it may be more complex and more vaguely defined; but the first concern remains the assumption of a credible role. Likewise the totally disguised social scientist, even as genuine participant, is always located in a given network of relationships.

Every research project is in a position partly to influence image formation by the way it identifies itself. However, these self-definitions are always dependent on verbalizations, and, at best, the influence they have is minimal unless supported overtly by the research worker. Field workers are well aware that the public is likely not to accept their statements at face value; gossip and talk between potential respondents when a research program first enters the field attests to this fact. This talk places the research worker in the context of the values, standards, and expectations of the population being studied, and its effect is to estab-
lish the identity of the field worker in the eyes of the public.

There is tremendous variation from field situation to field situation in the assignment of identity to the field worker. In the usual anthropological field situation he is identified as a trader, missionary, district officer, or foreign spy—any role with which the native population has had previous contact and experience. In time these ascriptions can and do change so that the anthropologist, for example, may even gain an identity within a kinship structure:

He was assigned on the basis of residence to an appropriate Kwoma lineage and, by equation with a given generation, was called "younger brother" or "father" or "elder uncle," depending on the particular "kinsman" who addressed him. Having found a place for Whiting in the kinship, the Kwoma could orient their social behavior accordingly.\(^5\)

In every case the field worker is fitted into a plausible role by the population he is studying and within a context meaningful to them. There seem to be no cases where field workers have not found a basis upon which subjects could react toward them. This is true even in the face of tremendous language barriers. Moreover, the necessary images and the basis for reaction which they provide are not only always found, but they are demanded by the mere fact of the research worker's intrusion into the life of his subjects. Even when a field worker is ejected, the image and meaningful context exists.

**SOCIAL ROLE OF THE PARTICIPANT OBSERVER**

Once he is placed in a meaningful context, the social position of the researcher is assured. His approach to the social structure is subsequently conditioned by his position.

Obviously the ascription and the assumption of a plausible role are not the equivalent of placing the participant observer in the experiential world of his subjects. Indeed, this impossibility is not his objective. For to achieve the experience of the subject, along

with the baggage of perceptions that goes along with it, is to deny a chance for objectivity. Instead, an observer usually prefers to keep his identity vague; he avoids committing his allegiance—in short, his personality—to segments of the society. This is true even when he studies specialized segments of mass societies and organizations. In this case the observer may deliberately antagonize management, for example, in order to gain the confidence of the union or segments of it. However, within the union he has further to choose between competing factions, competing leaders, or leadership membership cleavages. The anthropologist integrated into a kinship system or class faces the same problem. Eventually, no matter the size of the group he is studying, the observer is forced to face the problem of divided interests. He is "asked" to answer the question, "Who do you speak for?" and it is an answer to this question which, in the interests of research, he avoids.

Consequently, the observer remains marginal to the society or organization or segments of them which he studies. By his conscious action he stands between the major social divisions, not necessarily above them, but surely apart from them. Occupationally concerned with the objectification of action and events, he attempts to transcend all the local cleavages and discords. In avoiding commitments to political issues, he plays the role of political eunuch. He is socially marginal to the extent that he measures his society as a noninvolved outsider and avoids committing his loyalties and allegiances to segments of it. This is not hypocrisy but rather, as Howe has noted of Stendhal, it is living a ruse.\(^6\) Being both a participant and an observer is "the strategy of having one's cake and eating it too": "Deceiving the society to study it and wooing the society to live in." His position is always ambivalent, and this ambivalence shapes the character of the data he secures and the manner of securing them.

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\(^5\) Benjamin D. Paul in Kroeber et al. (eds.), *Anthropology Today*, p. 434.

THE PARTICIPANT OBSERVER’S DATA

All the information which the participant observer secures is conditioned by the meaningful context into which he is placed and by his own perspective as shaped by his being socially marginal. Together these circumstances greatly affect the kind of data he can get and the kind of experience he can have. The meaningful context into which he is placed by the public provides the latter with their basis for response, and his marginality specifies the order of experience possible for him.

To the extent that the observer’s data are conditioned by the basis upon which subjects respond to him, the anthropologist studying another culture has one important advantage. He can justifiably maintain an attitude of naïveté and on this basis exploit his situation as a stranger to the fullest possible extent. Indeed, it is relatively easy to breach local customs and standards and still maintain a tenable research position in the society. This naïve attitude cannot be assumed in working in his own culture, for the simple reason that the respondent cannot accept it as plausible. In fact, the difficulty of securing data may be increased by the “ethnocentrism” of some respondents who assume that their own experiences are similar to those of others. Yet with the increased complexity, specialization and pluralization of roles in American society, the social science observer is likely to have had no direct contact at all with whole ranges of experience. With the exception of his professional world (and partly because of his professionalization), he is something of a stranger in his own society without being in a position to exploit his innocence. He has the disadvantage of living in a society in which his experience is limited, while, at the same time, he is regarded as a knowledgeable member of all segments of it.

If the participant observer seeks genuine experiences, unqualifiedly immersing and committing himself in the group he is studying, it may become impossible for him to objectify his own experiences for research purposes; in committing his loyalties he develops vested interests which will inevitably enter into his observations. Anthropologists who have “gone native” are cases in point; some of them stop publishing material entirely.7 And all anthropologists have learned to make appropriate compensation in data interpreted by missionaries, traders, and government officials, no matter how excellent the material may be.

In practice, the solution to the dilemma of genuine versus spurious experiences is to make use of individuals who are socially marginal in the society being studied. In almost any society in this postcolonial and specialized age, the observer is likely to find persons with a penchant for seeing themselves objectively in relation to their society, such as the traveled Pacific Islander and the small-town “intellectual.” But they differ from the social scientist in one important respect: a portion of their experience, no matter how much it is subsequently objectified, has been gained within the society under study. When the social scientist studies a society, he characteristically makes his first contacts with these marginal persons, and they will vary according to his interests and the identity he claims for himself. Even when the observer tries to avoid the marginal individuals, he is nevertheless sought out by them. This is not unfortunate, for these types are a bridge, perhaps the most important one, to the meanings of the society. It is they who provide him with his first insights into the workings of the society. The sociologist studying his own society is, to varying degrees according to the relation between his background of experience and his object of study, his own bridge. Without such a bridge, without at least an interpreter or one lone native who can utter a word or two in another language, the observer would have no basis for approaching his data. The social marginality of the participant observer’s role with all the limitations it imposes provides a basis for communication and, hence, ultimately, for understanding.

7 Paul, in Anthropology Today, p. 435, names Frank Cushing as one.
FIELD TACTICS AND DATA EVALUATION

When the participant observer sets out to collect his data, he is faced with two types of problems: the tactical problem of maneuver in the field and the evaluation of the data. The two problems are related in that the data to be evaluated are conditioned by the field tactics. The discussion of them will be limited to selected problems central to the technique of participant observation: the tactical problem of conformity or nonconformity, the observer’s experience as related to the imputation of meaning and the formulation of categories, and the significance of participant observation to the study of social change.

Conformity or nonconformity to local standards and styles of living when engaging in field research is a relevant issue only in so far as the choice affects the research. Conformity is always conformity to specified standards and implies nonconformity to other possible standards. Almost all societies or groups in the contemporary world present alternative forms of behavior based on differing internal standards. Consequently it is hardly possible to conform to the standards of an entire society, and, hence, to follow a general policy of conformity is to follow no policy at all. Any policy which is designed to guide the field worker’s actions must be based on a deliberate judgment as to which sources of information must be used to secure data. In the adopting of standards necessary to keep these sources open, other sources are likely to be alienated and closed off, or data from them may be distorted.

Moreover, conscious conformity to any standards, at best, is “artificial,” for the participant observer does not commit himself to the point of genuine partisan action. In the interests of objectivity this is necessarily the case. In failing to make genuine commitments, he reveals his socially marginal position and the outside standards upon which he acts. In these terms the old argument posed by Radin, who said, “For any anthropologist to imagine that anything can be gained by ‘going native’ is a delusion and a snare,” and by Goldenweiser, who said of sharing the lives of the natives and participating in their culture, “The more successful an anthropologist is in doing this, the better foundation he has laid for his future work,” is no argument at all. The decision to assume standards and values or the degree to which participation is required is best made on the basis of the data to be collected and not on the basis of standard field practice.

The related tactical problem of conscious identification with groups, causes, or issues can be treated similarly. Complete and total neutrality is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to assume even where research considerations seem to demand it. By virtue of his research, no matter how transitory and irrespective of the exact dimensions of his marginal position, the investigator must react to the actions of his respondents. Neutrality even to the point of total silence is a form of reaction and not only will be considered as such by all parties to the conflict but also implies a specific attitude toward the issue—being above it, outside it, more important than it, not interested in it. Whatever meanings respondents attach to neutrality will, henceforth, be used as a further basis for response. This is true even when respondents demand an opinion or approval in structured interview situations. Failure to make a commitment can create resentment, hostility, and antagonism just as easily as taking a stand. In both cases, but each in its own way, relationships will be altered and, hence, data will be affected.

The data secured by the participant observer, except in so far as he reports personal experiences, cannot be independent of his subjects’ ability and willingness to report. He is obliged to impute meaning to both their verbal and their nonverbal actions. His own experiences, though genuine, are at best vicarious approximations of those of his respondents; he never completely enters their world, and, by definition, if he did, he would assume the values, premises, and standards of his subjects and thereby lose his usefulness to research except as another subject. If the action observed is purely.

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8 Both quoted in Paul, ibid., p. 438.
physical—the daily, routine physical movements of an individual, for example—the observer-interpreter cannot understand its meaning unless he communicates with the person involved in the action and gains insight into its meaning for the actor. Of course, studying within the meanings of his own society gives the observer a background of standardized meanings on which to draw. One knows that a man walking down the street at a certain time every morning is probably going to work. But the action of Raymond in One Boy's Day was observed precisely because it was not known. In more complicated action in a segment of society in which the observer does not have experience, he gains it vicariously by talking with others and in that way secures almost all his data.

The respondent, on the other hand, is not necessarily able to verbalize his experiences, and, as attested to by psychoanalysis, it is quite probable that he will not understand their meaning. The greater the social distance between the observer and the observed, the less adequate the communication between them. Hence, as stated above, the observer's data are determined by the subjects' ability and willingness to report. Since he cannot duplicate their experience, he cannot draw his conclusions from his own marginal experiences. He always operates in the borderland of their experience and, hence is still faced with the problem of imputing meaning to their actions. Whereas his subjects base their own interpretations and evaluations on folklore, religion, myth, illusion, special and vested interests or even on the basis of local standards of social analysis, the social science observer-analyst uses the independent and extraneous standards of science.

The participant-observation technique has been offered as one of the best techniques on which to base prearranged observational and structured interview categories. The assumption is that, with his greater familiarity with the respondents' experiences and their meanings, the participant observer is in the best position to draw up meaningful categories. However, with the passage of time and the assumption and ascription of new roles and statuses, his perspective on the society is constantly changing. His marginal position allows him more social movement by virtue of which his perceptions will change with time, particularly as he gains greater and greater familiarity. Categories which initially seemed meaningful later on may appear superficial or even meaningless. Moreover, as long as he remains a participant observer, his social marginality undergoes continuous redefinition. As a result any categories he formulates in advance or at any given time will seem inadequate later when his social perspective has changed. Attempts to establish categories into which directly observed action can be classified threaten to reduce the action to static entities which influence later observations, a condition which the technique of participant observation is designed to avoid. Indeed, it is this last condition which makes participant observation most suitable to the study of social change.

The technique of participant observation more than any other technique places the observer closer to social change as it takes place in a passing present. Change, as measured by the succession of days and hours rather than by years or arbitrary measures, takes place slowly. The desire of, and necessity for, individuals is to act in terms of what is possible in specific immediate situations. The immediacy of social change to those who are involved in the moving present tends to obscure their perspective on it: a continuous altering of his memories and definitions of reality makes the individual involved unaware of change. The participant observer is also involved in these changes, but, by his marginal position and his conscious effort to objectify himself, he achieves a measure of noninvolvement. Hence, his perspective is


10 These changes in circumstances refer not only to his position in the society he studies but also to the professional society with which he works and changes in research focus.
conditioned by considerations other than involvement. If the participant observer changed his perspective in phase with continuous changes in reality, he too could not see the change. For as long as changes in perspective accompany changes in reality, the change is likely not to be recognized. The participant who studies change as an observer must therefore maintain a perspective outside and independent of change. Noninvolvement helps to prevent the alteration of memory structures and permits the observer to see cumulative changes.

To refresh his memory, the participant observer can turn to his records. But, if his perspective has changed with time, he may disregard or discount early notes and impressions in favor of those taken later. Field notes from two different periods in a project may, indeed, be one of the more important means of studying change. Instead, what probably happens is that the field worker obscures change by treating his data as though everything happened at the same time. This results in a description from a single perspective, usually that held just before leaving the field, but redefined by the rereading of his notes.

CONCLUSIONS

Data collection does not take place in a vacuum. Perspectives and perceptions of social reality are shaped by the social position and interests of both the observed and the observer as they live through a passing present. The participant observer who is committed to relatively long periods of residence in the field experiences a continuous redefinition of his position. In this context the respondent’s basis of response, as conditioned by his image of the observer, changes in accordance with new images based on the changing definitions of the observer’s position. These forces influence the data.

A valid evaluation of data must necessarily include a reasonably thorough comprehension of the major social dimensions of the situation in which data were collected. The social positions of the observer and the observed and the relationship between them at the time must be taken into account when the data are interpreted. To fail to take account of these conditions is to assume an equivalence of situations which does not exist and leads to distortion.

To the extent that a participant observer can participate and still retain a measure of noninvolvement, his technique provides a basis for an approach to the problem of validity. The background of information which he acquires in time makes him familiar with the psychology of his respondents and their social milieu. With this knowledge he is able to impose a broader perspective on his data and, hence, to evaluate their validity on the basis of standards extraneous to the immediate situation. To accomplish this, it is necessary that the participant observer be skeptical of himself in all data-gathering situations; he must objectify himself in relation to his respondents and the passing present. This process of self-objectification leads to his further alienation from the society he studies. Between this alienation and attempts at objective evaluation lies an approach to the problem of validity.

University of Puerto Rico
Rio Piedras