

# Objectivity and Research Ethics in Participant Observation

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**ABSTRACT** Objectivity of the field research has been one of the most debated issues of qualitative research. Two important aspects of fieldwork-subjectivity and research ethics are discussed in this paper through the context of participant observation. Main argument of this paper is that objectivity is not a necessity when attempting to understand dynamics of societies and individuals, because the nature of humanity is based on social constructions, and subjective perspectives can only be bettered to an extent through adapting critical realism while in the field. Furthermore, it is argued that when the researcher has nativity to the group they are observing, this is not necessarily a disadvantage and this subjectivity can even contribute to the research. These arguments are enriched through various examples including examples from William Foot Whyte's Street Corner Society.

## INTRODUCTION

At some point in their careers, every qualitative researcher faces the question of objectivity of their approach. Most of the criticisms shape around researcher bias, informed consent, which are issues of research ethics (Bryman 2012; Jayaratne and Stewart 2014). Data are not considered to be collected objectively to satisfy the traditional, quantitative procedures of reliability and validity and the interpretations are considered to reflect the researcher's biased opinions or interpretations rather than facts (Bryman and Bell 2015; Kirk and Miller 1986). This is especially directed towards the observation method, as it is very challenging to find the exact same setting with the possibility to observe the same occurrence. Although these criticisms have been widely accepted among scholars, qualitative research also managed to achieve a level of acceptance over the years, especially in the form of interviews in mixed method research designs. Yet, objectivity in qualitative research still remains a significant issue with a negative connotation. Through this paper, the researcher puts forward a discussion on the issue of objectivity with the aim to provide a platform to further examine the potential benefits and risks of covert participant observation in relation to research ethics in order to develop the perception on objectivity, thus contributing to the ways one utilizes qualitative research.

## OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

### Objectivity vs Subjectivity

#### *An Epistemological and Ontological Discussion*

Debates have been going on between scholars for many years on positivism and interpretivism. According to positivist sociology, characteristics of a research are repeatability and objectivity. This view also supports the argument that in order to consider a research valid, it should be scientific. On the other hand, interactionist sociology view is based on a belief, which strongly argues that since researchers are also individuals, and individuals are the actors who construct their social world through assigning their own meaning and beliefs according to their cognition, social scientists can never be truly objective. Moreover, because attribution of meaning is based on a researcher's own symbolic meanings, this reflects on selection, processing and interpretation of the research data (Duffield 1998). Interpretivism is based on the subjective meaning of social action and an interpretivist approach "respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences" (Bryman and Bell 2015: 16). It is often associated with qualitative research approach. Hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition, symbolic interactionism and Weber's *Verstehen* (interpretation, understanding) are all examples of interpretivist epistemology.

However, cultures and societies have their own dynamics and they constantly evolve in their own momentum. Therefore, the benefits of adopting a social constructionist perspective should be acknowledged. Still, the social constructionist perspective can be enriched and its benefits can be extended if critical realist perspective is applied. Thus, although social constructionism provides the benefits of deconstructing certain realities and objects and shows how these realities and objects always could have been constructed differently, critical realism accounts for why things are the way they are and in what ways they could be bettered. People's observations and experiences have underlying and comparatively enduring biochemical, economic or social structures (Willig 1999: 45), although they may not be aware of these (Bhaskar 1989; Burr 2003). One can only understand, and therefore change the social world if one identifies the structures in life that generate those events and discourses. These structures are not spontaneously apparent in the observable pattern of events, and they can only be identified through the practical and theoretical work of the social sciences (Bhaskar 1989: 2). Thus, it would be a promising assumption to accept that people are affected by large-scale social forces and processes, and although they may not necessarily be aware of the way these forces and processes' impacts on their behaviors and interpretations (Saunders et al. 2003).

Keat and Urry's (1975) argument strengthens this paper's suggestion on the abovementioned assumption. They argue that in order to understand a phenomenon, one must uncover the connections between phenomena and this can be achieved through exploring underlying structures and mechanisms. However, while doing this one must assume that often one might come across unfamiliar processes and existence of unobservable entities that one had no knowledge of. Nevertheless, this process of exploration is what helps one go beyond how phenomena look and uncover what they really are to its actors (Keat and Urry 1975: 5).

From a critical realism perspective, the natural and social worlds are different, and social world, which is socially constructed, is dependent on human action for its existence (Fairclough 2005). Is it possible to be a social actor and be independent from the reality? Individuals contribute to the social phenomena and construct-

ed reality (Wahyuni 2012). Within this perspective, the objectivity issue is considered as an impossibility since the way the world is interpreted is shaped by the assumptions "that are embedded in one's perspective" (Burr 2003: 152). Considering the fact that social constructs impact the individual's perspectives, no one person can "step outside of their humanity and view the world from no position at all." One way or another everyone encounters the world from a perspective and hypotheses out of necessity, thus objectivity is impossible to achieve.

### **Participant Observation: What Do Researchers Know About It?**

For ethnographical data collection, observation has been seen as the most venerable tradition (Kirk and Miller 1986). Participant observation, which is also referred to as *subjective sociology* or *naturalistic method* has been the signature method for both, sociologists and modern anthropologists (Jarvie 1969). However, one sees an increase in the use of participant observation in other fields from medical (Tullis 2013) to management (Kawulich 2005). For example, a recent paper used covert participant observation to study how hipsters practice food-based resistance strategies in identity production (Cronin et al. 2014). Another application of observation can be seen in the field of conflict management (Katz et al. 2016). Although participant observation helps discover the nature of social reality, because a researcher's main aim is to understand the subject's perspective within the socio-environmental context of interaction, participant observation is considered to be subjective (Sociology Central 2003).

### **Observant Subjectivity and Overt Participant Observation**

When conducting participant observation, it is the role taken on by the researcher that helps him or her to have a place in a structure of relationships and this is seen as an essential part of a field study (Vidich 1955). Due to this nature, it is very likely that a researcher faces some ethical and methodological concerns while applying participant observation. Although all types of participant observation share common methodological and ethical concerns, there are also other distinctive issues unique to covert and overt

forms respectively. During 1981, Emerson criticized field researchers for not paying enough attention on correcting or formulating their research in a way to ensure conformity to quantitative standards. However, in today's field research practice, researchers see that conforming to quantitative standards is not a lack of quality in the research design (Emerson 1981).

Derrida (2002) suggests that ethnographers do not only need to convince others that they truly have been in the field but also to convince others that if they were in the same field, they should have seen what the researcher saw, they should have felt what the researcher felt and they should have concluded the same results from the investigation (Derrida 2002). Criticisms against ecological validity and internal validity of participant observation are not common, because the investigation takes place in the field thus ecological validity is very high, and internal validity is high due to data analysis' strong relation to empirical observation (Emerson 1981). However, a number of suggestions have been made by different researchers in order to increase the other associated validity types (for example, construct and face validity) and reliability of the field research. One of the suggestions is *host verification*, also sometimes called *respondent validation* where the interpreted findings are taken back to the respondents in order to take their feedback to determine the adequacy of the study. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether informants can validate a researcher's work (Emerson 1981; Bryman 2012). It is also suggested that multiple field researchers can increase the validity of a research (Emerson 1981). However, it is crucial to determine who decides who will be joining the research team, as there is a tendency by principal investigators to choose likeminded researchers.

It is also common to find attempts of longitudinal research on participant observation. For instance, Janes (1961) talks about an overt field situation in his study, where he observed the effects of a disastrous flood on a community activity. The researchers had made a series of visits to Riverville, a small town in USA and a couple of nearby counties. Fifteen years later, the same researcher made another visit to Riverville to study the same community. However, during the period that has passed, most of the informants were either dead or had moved away from Riverville (Janes 1961). This is an example

of a situation where participant observation is criticized for having low replicability and reliability. However, when one looks into the effect of a phenomenon on societies, one does not necessarily need to interview the same individuals. If, for instance, the flood was traumatizing for the society, transgenerational transmission of trauma might have been evident in the children of the participants (Volkan 2004). When the investigation is about a community activity as in Janes' (1961) example, first the researcher needs to acknowledge the societies' dynamic nature. This results in low replicability to no longer be a concern because a research investigating a disastrous event's impact on a society is not after replicability but rather an understanding of individuals who are members of that society.

Further criticism was put forward by Emerson (1981) who suggested that researchers depict their individual perspectives on the social world and interactions, thus distorting the lived reality of the respondents and the original perspective (Emerson 1981). According to Saunders et al. (2003), this affects objectivity, which is also considered as accuracy, thus influencing validity and reliability of the research. During data collection, in most cases, without being aware, researcher influences the informants, and in more extreme situations they change the structure and behavior of the group since they cannot avoid participating in discussions with the informants. But is this really a very big disadvantage of participant observation?

William Foot Whyte is well known among social scientists and qualitative researchers for his urban ethnography research, *Street Corner Society*, which was published in 1943. In the 1930s, he lived for three and a half years in Boston's North End to observe an Italian American slum (second generation Italian immigrants) that he called "Cornerville". His research intended to uncover the social worlds of street gangs. Although Whyte's ethnographic research has been a model since then, of course, it received methodological criticisms as well. Whyte used covert participant observation and he tried to avoid expressing his opinion on sensitive topics while participating in discussions (Whyte 1993). However, he questioned the success of such precaution himself in his *Participant Observer: An Autobiography* (Whyte 1994).

In both overt and covert forms of complete participation, the researcher has a threat of 'go-

ing native', which refers to a situation where the researcher can no longer be objective, as a result of losing sight as a researcher and having a view of the people that he or she is studying (Bryman and Bell 2015; Burgess 1984). Whyte express his situation of going native as:

*I was conducting a community study as a non-participating observer, but as I became accepted into the community, I found myself becoming almost a non-observing participant* (Whyte 1994: 96).

However, referring to the aforementioned discussion on objectivity, since it is impossible to achieve true objectivity, then subjective perspective of the researcher can only enhance the quality and depth of the interpretation. Furthermore, subjectivity resulting from 'going native' can result in richer data since the researcher lives and breathes the environment that he or she is investigating and starts to become a member of the group under investigation.

The *Hawthorne Effect* is known as the study that evidenced how certain aspects of an investigation might be influenced by the results, in particular where the research design is experimental (Heery and Noon 2001). In the research conducted at Western Electric's Hawthorne Plant by Elton Mayo and his researchers in 1924, the aim was to figure out how to maximize productivity and for that, they investigated the physical working conditions such as illumination and temperature, which may have effects, if any, on the productivity level of employees (Kreitner and Kinicki 2004; Gill and Johnson 1997). As it is in all experimental research, there were both experimental and control groups present. Regardless of how manipulation affected the physical conditions, the output level of experimental groups increased. Even when there was no manipulation in the physical conditions of the control group, their output level still increased gradually. Changes such as shortening break durations had also very insignificant effect on increasing output levels (Gill and Johnson 1997; Newstorm and Davis 2002). The Hawthorne Experiment shows how awareness of being observed influences the behavior of the observant. Then before a researcher decides whether to use observation, the following issues need to be addressed. The first issue is that the observant may act in certain ways because they know they are being observed, and therefore it is hard to decide whether they act naturally or act in certain

ways as a result of being observed. This is known as indexicality. Secondly, the researcher effect is a threat for an overt observation, as it was evidenced by the Hawthorne Experiment. The awareness of being part of a research may increase the sensitivity of an observant. In that situation, they may develop their own interpretations and act accordingly, in which their acting is heavily influenced by clues they derived from the experimenter, or from the settings. The last issue is that participants of an observation may attach different meanings and interpretations to the same stimuli as a result of differences in human perception (Gill and Johnson 1997). All of the abovementioned issues however, are neither controllable nor noticeable. The quotation from the juvenile gang leader and Whyte's key informant Ernest Pecci as called Doc in the Street Corner Society is a very good example of the Hawthorne Effect:

*You've slowed me up plenty since you've been down here. Now, when I do something, I have to think what Bill Whyte would want to know about it and how I can explain it. Before, I used to do things by instinct* (Whyte 1994:74).

Given the potential of issues arising due to conducting the observations overtly, the best fit for particular topics of research may be covert observation. However, there are strong criticisms against covert research such as they involve "out-and-out" deception, and that covert observation is counter to the norm of empirical research and of building up relations of trust with the observant and the like (Gilbert 2008). Therefore, this paper supports that participant privacy and rights should be the utmost priority in any research. Yet it argues that covert observation should not to be looked down on as an option unless it violates individual privacy, human rights, or research ethics.

### ***Ethics of Covert Participant Observation***

Deception is a kind of situation when the research is represented different than what it is in reality. Holliday's research on small firms is an example of deception, where she introduced herself as a student making a research in order to collect a competitor's product information. A classic example is Milgram's obedience to authority study where participants were convinced that they administered real electric shocks to another person (Bryman and Bell 2003). Code of Ethics,



published by American Sociological Association (ASA), states in section 12.05 paragraph (b) that sociologists never deceive research participants about significant aspects of the research that would affect their willingness to participate, such as physical risks, discomfort, or unpleasant emotional experiences (American Sociological Association 2008).

Therefore, field researchers should tell their respondents what the research is about, its purpose, methods, expected reporting and the like, which all supports overt participant observation (Emerson 1981). However, this may not be possible in all cases or may result in issues discussed previously. So, what happens when a researcher believes covert observation is the only approach that fits the investigation?

Not only in research ethics but also in all other aspects of ethics, privacy is one of the key issues. Many issues are covered within the research ethics, namely the way in which one analyzes and processes the data, participant reactions and permission, and confidentiality may influence or violate a participant's privacy. Even if participants agree to take part in a specific research, they still have the right to leave the research, or decide not to take part in a specific aspect of the study (Saunders et al. 2003).

Although due to its nature, while conducting covert observation a researcher should not inform the observant that they are being observed as most likely that will result in change of behavior. Once the data collection is complete, the researcher may approach the observant and take their consent and approval in terms of the content and accuracy of the interpretations or notes that will be made public. This approach is considered acceptable in certain situations. The American Sociological Association's Code of Ethics, United Kingdom's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)'s Framework for Research Ethics and British Psychological Society (BPS)'s Code of Human Research Ethics provide the flexibility of getting the consent after the observation in certain cases. They all state that in certain contexts, consent may be required to be managed after data are collected. "This might apply to research in the field of deviance especially where it involves illegal or immoral behavior" (ESRC 2015: 30; British Psychological Association 2010: 24).

Covert research may be undertaken when it may provide unique forms of evidence or where

overt observation might alter the phenomenon being studied. The broad principle should be that covert research must not be undertaken lightly or routinely. It is only justified if important issues are being addressed and if matters of social significance, which cannot be uncovered in other ways, are likely to be discovered (ESRC 2015: 30).

Although the above quote agrees that a researcher may need to conduct covert fieldwork, it is suggested to be used only if the researcher is investigating something important or something that is important for the society. However, the importance or significance of a research topic cannot be determined solely by the researcher because usually researchers are passionate about their subjects and clearly may not be able to determine if their work will benefit the society or whether it is an important discovery.

ASA, on the other hand, advocates that:

*Sociologists undertake the research if it involves no more than minimal risk for the research participants and if they have obtained approval to proceed in this manner from an institutional review board or in the absence of such boards, from another authoritative body with expertise on the ethics of research* (American Sociological Association 2008 Section 12.5d).

Therefore, unless they are bound by an institutional code of ethics, researchers need to consult various sources to make sure going with the covert observation is ethically just. This is particularly applicable to freelance researchers.

When people act in large groups or in public, there is an implicit acknowledgment that what happened may not be private or even if it is at that particular moment, may not stay that way. So, researchers may consider only sharing parts of their observation that were made in public settings or where the observant does not expect individual privacy. This approach is also in line with ASA's code of ethics (American Sociological Association 2008: Section 11.02c; American Sociological Association 2008: Section 12). Keeping an observant anonymous is also a very effective approach of using covert observation without violating privacy or the accepted code of research ethics. Pseudo-naming is also another solution to privacy issues as one can still keep the persona intact if individual characteristics are crucial to the research.

Besides informed consent, exploitation of the observer position is another ethical issue and it is argued that the main cause of success of participant observation is due to the exploitation of the role clashes (for example, student-teacher; stranger-friend) that arise from being covertly in the field and commonly it occurs in the forms of bribery, bullying and the likes (Jarvie 1969). In his field diary, well known social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, who is famous for his ethnographic fieldwork talks frankly about how he shouted at his informants and even punched one in the face (Malinowski 1989).

In another example of his work on three communities, one of them was Kupaliyume, which is a Carib village on the Surinam Shore of Maroni River, Kloss had a role conflicting experience. During his field study, few children died resulting from diarrhea and dehydration. In one of the cases, when the mother came to the observers for medicine, he insisted that she take her child to a doctor. She did and the child recovered, but he questioned himself whether he did the right thing since he thought there was a heavy verbal pressure on the observant. May be one of the most extreme examples of role conflict was again presented in Kloss's study:

*In the same year an observer, who was not an anthropologist, in another Amerindian village, was instrumental in keeping a sick person in the village instead of urging him to go to a hospital, or even being neutral. The sick person died, and the observer was able to witness a funeral, which was perhaps his intention* (Kloss and Jarvie 1969: 510).

According to Punch, fieldworkers should be their own moralists (Punch 1986). However, Kloss stands completely on the opposite side of the argument and claims that even if an observer sticks to his/her own moral values while deciding in tough ethical situations, in some circumstances it is questionable to what extent it is possible for a researcher to pursue research and at the same time adopt to own moral values (Kloss and Jarvie 1969).

The aforementioned extreme examples from ethnography literature, presents how fieldwork demanded individual ethical decision-making while conducting participant observation in the past. However, researchers are better guided now through code of conduct guidelines provided by professional bodies and institutions. However, every field researcher has an obligation to-

wards his/her employer, towards the profession and above all towards the society (Resnic 1996). If the research is conducted in the name benefiting the society, then when a situation demands unethical practice, it is the responsibility of the researcher to pick another field or to reconsider the research.

Throughout the decades, the discussion elements of research ethics changed and research ethics gained a strong emphasis on research methods. So, there is a better established consensus and bodies that provides guidelines on what involves ethical fieldwork (Bryman 2012). A researcher's individual emotions and feelings that occur in the field of ethnographic research have been started to be discussed in the literature as a tool for reflective thinking and crucial interrogation (DeLuca and Maddox 2015).

## CONCLUSION

In this paper two aspects of fieldwork have been discussed through the context of participant observation: subjectivity and research ethics. The researcher acknowledges that in order for a piece of research to be deemed as scientific, it needs to have a level reliability, and yet this does not imply a prerequisite of objectivity. Subjectivity is not necessarily a negative outcome because by nature, societies, their members and their nature are subjective. Even if something is proven that it is perceived by  $x$  number of people the  $y$  way or repeated research led to same results, this still does not provide an objective account of reality but a mere reflection of the participants' subjective reality and the researcher's subjective interpretation. This is particularly true about social phenomena. Once researchers acknowledge that true objectivity is not achievable by individuals, and understand their subjectivity, they can enrich their research. One of the best ways to collect data about a social phenomenon is to participate with the group and observe them in their natural setting. With participant observation, subjectivity comes and if the researcher has the awareness, then this subjectivity can benefit the research. Although it can be challenged in terms of research ethics, covert participants provide grounds to collect the purest form of observational data from the main informants. Because of the limitations imposed by overt research, although researchers may prefer to use covert observation, due to its characteristics, they usually refrain from it.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is strongly recommended that before going to the field, the researchers should familiarize themselves with the code of research ethics of the institution they are affiliated with. If there are any potential violations, then they should alter the research design or find an alternative method for data collection. However, if there are no violations and if it is the best fit for their research, then researchers can pursue covert participant observation. The validation of this fit can also be confirmed by another researcher experienced on the discipline to make sure there are no researcher biases.

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