

POLI 344

Methods of Political Research

SESSION 3: Participant and Non-Participant Observation Method

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Participant Observation

Participant Observation Method

In the previous section, we learned about observation which is such that the observer can observe the activities of the subjects because the activities being observed take place in “public” and the observer does not need the cooperation of the subjects under observation. When the observer cannot observe because the event is not public then the observer needs to assume a role in the field in order to be able to observe. This is participant observation.

Participant and Non-Participant Observation

Participant and Non-Participant Observation

Whether the observer or researcher himself/herself should become an element of or participant in the social field in which he is observing behavior or whether he should observe from the outside as non-participant is, among others, determined by the practical possibilities for access to the particular situation and by the knowledge already theoretically gained about the social field being studied.

Participant and Non-Participant Observation

Participant Observation

Participant Observation is characterized by the immediate participation of the observer in the social processes of the socio-cultural system being studied. The observer assumes one or several roles which are defined within the system, becomes a member of that system and behaves accordingly towards other members. This is done with the intention of obtaining insights into the concrete or natural behavior of people in specific situations by means of direct contact and by grasping both their frame of reference and the

Participant and Non-Participant Observation

orienting models determining their behavior. The observer experiences directly the reality of the role he assumes in learning the institutionalized behavior conventions bound up with it by experiencing the consequences of conforming or otherwise to those norms in his behavior. Such kind of participant observation is used where we are exploring a social field about which we have little empirical knowledge available.



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By analyzing the acquired experience of the observer as a role playing member, we are able to build up a model of the social field from which we can infer hypothesis about relationships.

The observer can also assume a role in the system being observed if any other approach is impossible as for example being refused access, or that his/her presence would alter the processes taking place in the field of observation.

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In such a case, the observer uses the social role simply as a cover in order to gain access to the processes he is interested in. Before the observer assumes a social role two problems must be resolved:

It is important to choose the particular social role in the light of the explicit aims of the research i.e. we must first make sure that the observation made possible by taking this role are relevant at least to a part of the research topic. If the aim is to investigate the process of

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interaction among a group of production line workers by means of participant observation, then there is no point in disguising the observer in the role of a forklift truck driver who only provides the work group with necessary materials at certain intervals in their working period. It could happen that whenever the forklift driver/observer turns up at the group with materials, their usual harmony is broken and their quarrel would be over the material he is delivering.

Participant and Non-Participant Observation

Before choosing a social role for the observer it must be shown that it is possible for him to assume the role without too much of an expenditure of time and effort. In each socio cultural system the majority of roles can only be adopted where certain social qualifications are attributed or acquired which the observer does not already possess and which he cannot gain at the time at his disposal. In order to study the decision making processes in the executive committee of a political party or an industrial concern or in the commanding ranks of an army,



Participant and Non-Participant Observation

the participant observer would have to be capable of assuming the role of at least an executive assistant in the political party or industrial concern and an adjutant in the army. These particular positions would however not be immediately available to him. In such a situation the problem of access can sometimes be solved if the observer succeeds in persuading a key person in the field of observation to put himself in some kind of role which could appear plausible to the other participants.

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In such a case it becomes necessary to reveal to this key person, the actual aims of the research to gain his interest in it. The problem with such total participation is that the more the participant observer attempts to play the role he is chosen as authentically as possible, the more strongly he will come to identify with this role. This can lead to the observer losing sight of the theoretical frame of reference of the observation and his reports become valuable rather as primary material like the report of any other participant.

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A further difficulty in this kind of total participation is that observations cannot usually be recorded while they are being made, but only in retrospect. For this reason alone the report is usually relatively unstructured and remains at the level of qualitative description. Such reconstruction from memory often gives rise to distortions which must be controlled for.

Activity

Name two Political activities that you can observe as a participant observer:

1.....
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.....2.....
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Summary

We have learned in this section that where it is not possible for the researcher to observe from outside the field of observation because the field is not public then the observer has to become a participant observer. Participant observation *is characterized by the immediate participation of the observer in the social processes of the socio-cultural system being studied. The observer assumes one or several roles which are defined within the system, becomes a member of that system and behaves accordingly towards other members.*

Summary

This is done with the intention of obtaining insights into the concrete or natural behavior of people in specific situations by means of direct contact and by grasping both their frame of reference and the orienting models determining their behavior.



Non-Participant Observation

Introduction

There are observations that researchers engage in for their data collection which does not require the cooperation of the subjects under observation. The observer need not be part of the field within which the observation is being done. This is known as nonparticipant observation.

Non-Participant Observation

Such observation is typical of pure laboratory situations though not limited to them. It can be used whenever the

Non-Participant Observation

behavior of interest occurs in situations which are defined as public and in which the minimal role of non-participant exists. Non-participant observation is not dependent on a systematic plan of observation however it facilitates the standardization of social situations to be observed. In such situations the observer is not required to participate actively in the social processes at work in the social field he is observing.

Non-Participant Observation

Since he is not immediately affected by the demands of the situation he can concentrate his whole attention on systematic observation of the situation and what is happening in it.

Non participant observation can rarely be carried out in natural situations without the knowledge of the people under observation. The role of the observer is as a rule explicitly introduced into the field of observation. The danger here is that the situation under observation can be altered by the presence of the observer and thus ceases to be

Non-Participant Observation

natural. This is especially true where a situation is defined as private, confidential or even secret. Non participant observation in natural situations can therefore only be carried out if it is known that the introduction of the role of observer does not seriously alter the social process.

Some Advantages of the Observational Method

1. There is the possibility of recording events simultaneously and spontaneously as they occur i.e. observation yields data that pertains directly to the typical behavioural situations.

Non-Participant Observation

2. It is possible to deal with subjects' correspondence who are not able to give verbal reports by either their behavior or their feelings for the simple reason that they cannot speak. We can also say that observation is independent of a subject's or an individual's ability to report.
3. Observation is independent of the respondent's willingness to report and some people are even afraid to be singled out.

Non-Participant Observation

4. It is less demanding of the active cooperation on the part of the subjects.
5. Observation gives a full picture of how people behave in a given situation



Activity

Name two Political activities that you can observe as a non-participant observer:

1.....
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.....2.....
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.....
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Summary

In this section we have learned that non-participant observation can be used whenever what we want to observe can be defined as lying in a situation we can call as public and in which the minimal role of non-participant exists. Non-participant observation is not dependent on a systematic plan of observation however it facilitates the standardization of social situations to be observed. In situations like this the observer is not required to participate actively in the social processes at work in the social field he is observing.

Summary

The observer has to establish a good relationship with the whole group or structure being observed. In such situations the researcher should avoid premature identification with one side or faction of the community. The observer would also need to make known to the community or group the reason for his/her presence. This increases the chances of getting information.



THANK YOU

