



## Participant Observation

### Brief Description

Participant Observation is a data collection method that can be integrated into daily practice relatively easily because it requires little effort and is very compatible with the everyday life of those being observed. In participant observation the observers locate themselves within the social setting to be observed and participate in it actively. The scientific method of Participant Observation differs from ordinary forms of participation and observation in three aspects: intention, selection and analysis (Schöne 2003). When we use Participant Observation to e.g. collect data for a needs assessment or evaluation, we pursue a certain objective or purpose, select only particular components of what we notice and analyse these systematically.

### Prerequisites

- Sufficient time for preparing, conducting and analysing the observation
- If using the method in private or semi-public locations, first obtain permission where appropriate

### Applications

- Needs assessment
- Evaluation
- Continuous learning and improvement of practice

### Process Overview

1. Preparation
2. Conducting the observation(s)
3. Analysing the observations

### Resources Required

#### *Time:*

The time required varies significantly depending on the purpose and location of data collection through observation. Enough time should be allocated to prepare for observation (briefing meeting, observation form including pre-testing where appropriate), for conducting it (best done repeatedly) and for analysis.

#### *Personnel:*

If possible, several people should be observing simultaneously because this way several impressions and points of view can be recorded (multiple perspectives). It is advisable to select observers who can immerse themselves well into the social setting to be observed and who are not reluctant to make contact.



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## *Materials:*

An observation form can be created and used, but notes may also be taken on paper or electronically without a structured form. Photography and video recording may be used to assist observation. It is, however, important to take care not to intrude upon the privacy of others and to obtain prior permission where necessary.

## **Working Steps**

### 1. Preparation

The purpose of Participant Observation is clarified in advance. It may for example serve to evaluate the effectiveness of a health promotion or prevention intervention by documenting the target group's responses.

What needs to be paid attention to is discussed during preparation. If, for example, an audience's responses to an event are being observed, several positions may be considered for observation as well as particular behaviours of the target group (attention, participation, laughter, applause etc.). Not only indications of the desired effects, but also indications of potentially undesirable effects and responses should be taken into consideration.

It is clarified when and how notes are to be taken of the observations: during or after participating in the setting, with or without structured forms, with or without photography or video recording. It is always good to test a method in advance. Observation forms should therefore also be subject to pre-testing like any other data collection instrument.

### 2. Conducting the Observation(s)

Participant Observation should disrupt what occurs in the setting as little as possible. Important persons in the setting should be advised of the data collection activity in advance (e.g. the owners of bars where audience responses to a prevention event are observed). It may be opportune to use several observers simultaneously in order to record different impressions and perspectives. Photography or video recording may be used in support (privacy legislation and regulations must be observed, however). Detailed notes are best taken afterwards, although it can be useful to note down impressions and observations in point form at the time. These notes are then expanded on retrospectively, adding as much descriptive detail as possible. The longer and more frequent an observation takes place in a particular setting, the better the data usually become because certain patterns and the exceptions to them appear clearer and the observers' attention becomes sharper with repeated observation.

### 3. Analysing the Observations

Notes are entered into a word processing document. Notes should clearly show which observations were made when, by whom and from which perspective. The analysing team reads all observations and compares them. Both similarities and differences between observations are interpreted. The differences are often particularly instructive. These data may also be used to supplement those from other sources, such as interviews or Rapid Assessments.



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## Please Note:

- Observers should enter the setting as open-mindedly and receptively as possible so that they are able to notice the unexpected.
- When observing it is good to let go of the expectation to notice everything, and instead look more closely and attentively at that which presents itself.
- As much descriptive detail as possible should be documented when writing notes, especially when working on the comprehensive electronic version.
- The main notes are primarily about good descriptions, less about assessments or interpretations. It is helpful to separate these two steps as clearly as possible: 1) impressions from observation and participation (in the setting/field); 2) description (when writing notes); 3) assessment and analysis (during analysis in the team).

## Further Advice

- Different observations of the same phenomenon are possible (depending, for example, on the perspective)
- Different interpretations of the same observation are also possible (depending, for example, on the background of the person analysing the observation)

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## Further Reading and Links

Teilnehmende Beobachtung. Methodenkoffer. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung. Zugänglich über: <http://www.bpb.de/methodik/5JRHHM,0,0,Methodensuche.html>

*(Participant Observation. Tool Kit. Federal Centre for Political Education. Available at: <http://www.bpb.de/methodik/5JRHHM,0,0,Methodensuche.html> (In German))*

Flanierende Begehung und Beobachtung. Methodenkoffer. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung. Zugänglich über:

[http://www.bpb.de/methodik/J4X00C,0,0,Anzeige\\_einer\\_Methode.html?mid=513](http://www.bpb.de/methodik/J4X00C,0,0,Anzeige_einer_Methode.html?mid=513)

*(Walk-Through and Observation. Tool Kit. Federal Centre for Political Education. Available at:*

*[http://www.bpb.de/methodik/J4X00C,0,0,Anzeige\\_einer\\_Methode.html?mid=513](http://www.bpb.de/methodik/J4X00C,0,0,Anzeige_einer_Methode.html?mid=513) (In German))*

Schöne, Helmar (2003) Die teilnehmende Beobachtung als Datenerhebungsmethode in der Politikwissenschaft. Methodologische Reflexion und Werkstattbericht. Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung, 4 (2), verfügbar über <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/720/1559>

*(Schöne, Helmar (2003) Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method for Political Science. Methodological Reflection and Workshop Report. Forum for Qualitative Social Research, 4 (2), available at <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/720/1559> (In German))*