

respondents, interviewees, focus group members, informants, and so on. Participants contribute data to research in a number of ways, such as through questionnaires, interviews, experiments, personal health records, narratives, focus groups, and direct observation.

Participants are usually considered to be individuals or groups who agree to take part in a research process. The agreement to participate in research bestows obligations on researchers to ensure that participants are treated in a manner that conforms to accepted ethical standards. In other words, participants should receive sufficient information to give free and informed consent prior to taking part in research. This includes information that describes the individual or group invited to participate, who is doing the research (e.g., researcher's name and affiliation), the nature and duration of participation required (e.g., interview, task performance), confidentiality safeguards, and any expected harms (e.g., distress or pain) or benefits (e.g., payment, new knowledge). Additionally, informed consent generally includes a statement that research participants may decline their participation or withdraw participation at any time, without penalty.

Some research participants (e.g., some children and mentally incompetent persons) lack the legal or mental capacity to give informed consent. In such circumstances, an authorized third party such as a parent or guardian should be involved in the informed consent process.

Creating opportunities for informed consent is not always possible or desirable, and this desire is often the case in naturalistic observation. When people know they are being observed, they may alter their behavior as a consequence of awareness that they are being observed, a concept known as reactivity. To avoid reactivity, participants in naturalistic research settings are usually unaware that they are being observed and therefore do not engage in an informed consent process. In these situations, it is incumbent on the researcher to be respectful of their privacy and dignity. For example, a researcher may decide to observe the interactions of consenting adults in a sex club, but it would violate participants' dignity if these adults were to be identified as a result.

Some research methodologies fundamentally transform the traditional relationship of researcher-as-observer and participant-as-observed. For example, in action research the researcher often becomes a resource to the participants who are being studied. It is

the participants (often disadvantaged groups) who will assume significant control over the research process, including the defining of research questions and research designs, in order to achieve their goals. Given the reduced inequality in power relationships between research and participants in action research, the ethical obligations and requirements of informed consent for participants are also much more negotiable and often less clearly defined than in other types of research.

Russel Ogden

See also Action Research; Informed Consent; Naturalistic Observation

Further Readings

Lofman, P., Pelkonen, M., & Pietila, A.-M. (2004). Ethical issues in participatory action research. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences, 18*, 333–340.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Participant observation is a method of data collection in which the researcher takes part in everyday activities related to an area of social life in order to study an aspect of that life through the observation of events in their natural contexts. The purpose of participant observation is to gain a deep understanding of a particular topic or situation through the meanings ascribed to it by the individuals who live and experience it. The term was first used by social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski in the 1920s, and the approach was further developed by the Chicago School under the leadership of Robert Park and Howard Becker. Participant observation is regarded as being especially appropriate for studying social phenomena about which little is known and where the behavior of interest is not readily available to public view. Through its emphasis on firsthand access to the real world and its meanings it is effective in allowing understanding of the way of life of others.

Participant observation is characterized by emergent design involving a variety of methods including direct observation of human behavior and the physical features of settings, informal interviewing, and document analysis. Researchers adopt roles that have been described by Raymond Gold as varying along a continuum of participation ranging from complete observer

(no participation), through participant-as-observer (more observer than participant) and observer-as-participant (more participant than observer) to complete participant. Data are typically recorded in the form of fieldnotes that, in order for the investigator to remain as unobtrusive as possible, are written up from memory either in secluded areas such as washrooms or at the end of the day. Participant observation usually entails prolonged engagement in the field that allows for gathering more detailed and accurate information. For example, a researcher who observes a setting for several months can identify discrepancies between what people say and what they actually do.

Several methodological problems are associated with participant observation. It is not well suited to the study of large groups or populations. Gaining access to social contexts of interest—in other words, obtaining permission to collect data, establishing credibility, and earning the trust of those being observed—can be very challenging. Personal characteristics such as gender, age, and ethnicity of the investigator can interfere with access. A variety of strategies are used by researchers to overcome access problems, such as choosing a setting to which one already has some relationship through work or personal life, taking on a small task that benefits the group to be observed, and staying in the field long enough for habituation to occur. Finally, it is well known that the presence of an observer will change to at least some extent the context being studied that may threaten the trustworthiness of the data collected.

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See also Access; Nonparticipant Observation; Observational Research; Participant; Prolonged Engagement

Further Readings

- Jorgensen, D. L. (1989). *Participant observation: A methodology for human studies*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Spradley, J. P. (1980). *Participant observation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

contributors and investigators to the findings of a research project. This qualitative research approach validates and privileges the experiences of participants, making them experts and therefore co-researchers and collaborators in the process of gathering and interpreting data. In traditional research, the researcher is assumed to be the authority figure who will collect, interpret, and situate the findings while the participant (or “researched”) merely represents the community being investigated. In these situations, the researcher and participant (or organization) have a time-limited relationship that expires when the research project is complete.

This method is an interdisciplinary approach often used in the social sciences, including but not limited to feminist or women’s studies, health communication, sociology, and anthropology. Participant involvement in the research process varies and can be seen as beneficial or problematic.

Benefits of Utilizing Participants as Co-Researchers

Participants as co-researchers is an approach that promotes participant involvement in the research process. Participants have the opportunity to tell their own stories and give an insider perspective to the process of being the object or subject of research. Participants are also able to offer their own interpretation of the researcher’s findings, voicing their opinion in response to the researcher, thereby giving voice to the community or group that is being researched. Together, the researcher and participant work to come to conclusions, engaging in dialogue and offering each other feedback.

Additionally, utilizing participants as co-researchers gives researchers the opportunity to use the experiences and knowledge of participants to learn about and discuss the research. Co-researchers contribute to the research by offering credibility to the findings and credibility to the researcher (within the community or organization). The involvement of an active participant encourages other participants to join the conversation and respond with their own interpretations. This encouragement allows the researcher to take on the role of student, allowing the research process to be a learning event.

The insider status of participants in research projects contributes to the benefit of “insider” status and, more generally, to the information gathered in the study. When

PARTICIPANTS AS CO-RESEARCHERS

Participants as co-researchers refers to a participatory method of research that situates participants as joint