

## Participant observation

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### Short description

Participant observation is fundamental to understanding the social dynamics, actions, social behavior, and social practices, of a research partner, be it an individual, such as citizens or neighbors, or a social group, such as the grassroots initiatives or coalitions. It requires the researcher's presence on site, implicating their regular observation of a study case with which the researcher interacts and participates personally, either by its mere presence, dialoguing or conversing with the research object, or engaging in the researched activity. It is characterized by a systematic approach, focus, and methodological control.

**Tags/keywords:** Method, Qualitative research, ethnographic methods, participatory observation, on-site, social processes, researcher's interaction/positionality.

### Details

Participant observation involves the interaction of the researcher with the study subject. In the case of Fairville, with the different groups of actors involved in the co-production process, such as citizens, bottom-up initiatives, or institutional actors. Unlike other methods, thanks to the proximity with the research object, participant observation is able to capture inner insights and the ways of doing as in contrast to how people frame and verbally make sense of the world in qualitative interviews. While participant observation captures the doings, qualitative interviews capture the sayings. Hence, it is suitable when the study subject is framed in an intricate social situation that is difficult to grasp from the outside. Through the personal experience of situations, participant observation provides knowledge that is inaccessible through secondary research, gray literature, or even discussions with experts. As a researcher, participant observation presents a suitable method to explore co-production, for the researcher participates in the co-creation process. Thus, allowing the social process of co-production to be researched from the inside.

Considering the direct implication of the researcher in participant observation, it is important to understand that the method extends beyond the mere physical presence to a full interaction in which the researcher's participation elicits a change in social interaction.

Furthermore, despite the proximity of the researcher to the study object, participant observation demands a certain distance to ensure scientific scrutiny of the object. Therefore, it requires a constant shift from the proximity in the participation to the objective distance of the observation.

In participant observation, ensuring reliability and validity is crucial for credible results. Reliability ensures consistent research methods, while validity confirms the accuracy of findings. Triangulation strengthens both by cross-verifying data through multiple methods, such as interviews alongside observations. Reflexivity involves the researcher's critical self-reflection on their influence over the research due to personal biases and decisions, safeguarding the research from subjectivity. These practices are integral to the rigour of participant observation, enhancing its trustworthiness and the generalisability of its insights.

## Steps

- Step 0: Acquaintance with the study subject, framing the research object.
- 1st: Develop observational categories (one cannot grasp the entirety of reality). Put them into practice and test them. When is the degree saturated?
- 2nd: Implement a systematic way to take field notes (diary, memo, sketches, images) > Field notes are essential to validate observational methods.

## Resources and materials required

- On-site presence. Acquaintance with the observed subject.
- Notebook and a pen, and a systematic way of taking notes.

## Tips/ What to pay attention to

- Access to the fieldwork, and acquaintance with the study object.
- Own positionality of the researcher and the extent of their interaction with the study case.
- Proximity to the research while ensuring a scientific gaze.
- Ethical issues, regarding standards and performance criteria in the observation of certain participants. Question of the quality and the "essence" of the observed insights in comparison to other methods such as qualitative semi-structured interviews or quantitative surveys.

## Examples of use

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## Further reading/ (re)sources

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