

# PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Tim May and Beth Perry

- Participant observation is the practice of positioning oneself within and alongside those in the 'field' and undertaking research about the social world by being part of it.
- Participant observation seeks to avoid preconceived ideas or assumptions about what is important. Knowledge comes from experience and undertaking detailed inquiries into the contexts in which understandings are generated.
- The practice of participant observation involves many dimensions – from walking, driving, strolling, observing, listening and engaging in activities. Paying attention to one's role and questions of access, flexibility, time, place and social circumstances are key, along with detailed recording and analysis of fieldnotes and the representation of the work.
- Contemporary debates include whether participant observation is a discrete method, rather than form of enquiry. In addition, a critical question relates to the extent to which it is incumbent on the researcher to leave the field unchanged, or to actively seek to intervene in each situation.

The popularity of participant observation has led to concerns over the place of ethnography and its loss of distinctiveness.

(May and Perry, 2022: 188)



## DISCUSS

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of participant observation compared to other methods of social research?
- 'Fiction or social fact?' What do you think is the status of ethnographic investigation?
- Do the different roles performed in conducting observation produce different accounts of social life and does that matter?
- Can you do participant observation online? How far can the approach be adapted digitally before it loses its distinctiveness?

## DO

*You are interested in how planning decisions are made in a metropolitan area in England and want to undertake an institutional ethnography using participant observation.*

- How would you design this study and why?
- How would you gain access and position yourself in the field?
- What are the barriers you might need to overcome inside your chosen organisation?
- How will you represent your findings and to whom?

This summary has been developed as an Open Access resource to support educators, students and researchers to develop and extend their understanding of the practice of social research. It draws on May, T. and Perry, B. (2022) *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process*. London: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill. To buy the book, please visit [Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process](#), use code OPENUP20 for a discount.