

Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide

Module 2

Participant Observation



Participant Observation

What people say they believe and say that they do are often contradicted by their behavior. A large body of scientific literature documenting this disparity exists, and we can all likely summon examples from our own lives. Given the frequency of this very human inconsistency, observation can be a powerful check against what people report about themselves during interviews and focus groups.

This module presents the basics of conducting participant observation in applied research projects:

- Overview of Participant Observation
- Ethical Guidelines
- Logistics of Participant Observation
- How to Be an Effective Participant Observer
- Suggested Readings
- Case Study Samples
- Participant Observation Steps

Overview of Participant Observation

What is participant observation?

Participant observation is a qualitative method with roots in traditional ethnographic research, whose objective is to help researchers learn the perspectives held by study populations. As qualitative researchers, we presume that there will be multiple perspectives within any given community. We are interested both in knowing what those diverse perspectives are and in understanding the interplay among them.

Qualitative researchers accomplish this through observation alone or by both observing and participating, to varying degrees, in the study community's daily activities. Participant observation always takes place in community settings, in locations believed to have some relevance to the research questions. The method is distinctive because the researcher approaches participants in their own environment rather than having the participants come to the researcher. Generally speaking, the researcher engaged in participant observation tries to learn what life is like for an "insider" while remaining, inevitably, an "outsider."

While in these community settings, researchers make careful, objective notes about what they see, recording all accounts and observations as field notes in a field notebook. Informal conversation and interaction with members of the study population are also important components of the method and should be recorded in the field notes, in as much detail as possible. Information and messages communicated through mass media such as radio or television may also be pertinent and thus desirable to document.

What can we learn from participant observation?

Data obtained through participant observation serve as a check against participants' subjective reporting of what they believe and do. Participant observation is also useful for gaining an understanding of the physical, social, cultural, and economic contexts in which study participants live; the relationships among and between people, contexts, ideas, norms, and events; and people's behaviors and activities – what they do, how frequently, and with whom.

In addition, the method enables researchers to develop a familiarity with the cultural milieu that will prove invaluable throughout the project. It gives them a nuanced understanding of context

that can come only from personal experience. There is no substitute for witnessing or participating in phenomena of human interaction – interaction with other people, with places, with things, and with states of being such as age and health status. Observing and participating are integral to understanding the breadth and complexities of the human experience – an overarching research endeavor for any public health or development project.

Participant observation in action

In the early 1990s, sharing needles during injection drug use was a known risk factor for HIV acquisition in the United States. After educational campaigns informed injection drug users about the importance of using clean needles, surveys indicated that needle-sharing had declined. High rates of HIV transmission persisted among this population, however.

An anthropologist's observation of heroin users in one state confirmed that users were not sharing needles. In observing the preparation process leading up to injection, however, the anthropologist noticed numerous opportunities for cross-contamination of the instruments shared in cooking and distributing the heroin (such as cooking pots, cotton, and needles) and of the liquid heroin itself. Discovery of this phenomenon through participant observation constituted an important contribution to understanding injection drug use behavior as related to HIV acquisition. The phenomenon itself is now known as "indirect sharing."

Through participant observation, researchers can also uncover factors important for a thorough understanding of the research problem but that were unknown when the study was designed. This is the great advantage of the method because, although we may get truthful answers to the research questions we ask, we may not always ask the right questions. Thus, what we learn from participant observation can help us not only to understand data collected through other methods (such as interviews, focus groups, and quantitative research methods), but also to design questions for those methods that will give us the best understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

What are the disadvantages of participant observation?

The main disadvantage of participant observation is that it is time-consuming. In traditional ethnographic research, researchers spend at least one year in the field site collecting data through participant observation and other methods. This is not practical for most applied research studies, which necessarily require a shorter period of data collection. This weakness is partially mitigated in most current international development projects by the tendency for the inquiry to be more focused than in traditional ethnographic study and for the data collection team to include researchers who are native rather than foreign to the region. Researchers who already possess a solid base of cultural awareness are better able to concentrate on the research question itself.

A second disadvantage of participant observation is the difficulty of documenting the data – it is hard to write down everything that is important while you are in the act of participating and observing. As the researcher, you must therefore rely on your memory and on your own personal

More objective:

The waiting room of the antenatal clinic was empty except for one girl who looked to be approximately 5 to 8 years old. She was sitting in the corner behind a chair. She peeked out from behind it and looked at us when we entered the room talking. Her nose was running and her eyes were red and swollen.

More subjective:

The waiting room of the antenatal clinic was deserted except for a young girl who had been abandoned there by her mother. She had been wedged into the corner behind a chair so she wouldn't wander off. She glared at us because we were making so much noise. She had probably been crying for a long time.

discipline to write down and expand your observations as soon and as completely as possible. It is easy to tell yourself that you will do this task later, but, because memory fades quickly, postponing the expansion of notes can lead to loss or inaccurate recording of data. The quality of the data therefore depends on the diligence of the researcher, rather than on technology such as tape recorders.

A third disadvantage of participant observation is that it is an inherently subjective exercise, whereas research requires objectivity. It is therefore important to understand the difference between reporting or describing what you observe (more objective) versus interpreting what you see (less objective). Filtering out

personal biases may take some practice. One way to practice is to write down objective observations of a given event on one side of a page, and then offer more subjective interpretations of the same event on the other side of the page, as illustrated in the box at left. Alternately, in team-based research, field staff can review one another's field notes and help identify objective versus subjective observations. Table 2 below summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of participant observation in qualitative research.

Table 2. Strengths and weaknesses of participant observation

Strengths

Allows for insight into contexts, relationships, behavior

Can provide information previously unknown to researchers that is crucial for project design, data collection, and interpretation of other data

Weaknesses

Time-consuming

Documentation relies on memory, personal discipline, and diligence of researcher

Requires conscious effort at objectivity because method is inherently subjective

What form do participant observation data take?

In large part, participant observation data consist of the detailed field notes that the researcher records in a field notebook. Although typically textual, such data may also include maps and other diagrams, such as kinship or organizational charts. Occasionally, participant observation may involve quantification of something and, as a result, produce numerical data. For example, the researcher could count the number of people who enter a particular space and engage in a particular activity during a specified segment of time. Textual notes are entered into computer files, and data of all forms are analyzed and consulted on a regular basis throughout the study, as discussed elsewhere in this module. (See the Case Study Sample Field Notes, page 26.)

How are participant observation data used?

In applied research, as in traditional ethnography, participant observation is almost always used with other qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups. It is an integral part of the iterative research process – that is, the back-and-forth revising and refining – in several ways:

At the beginning stages of a research project, participant observation is used to facilitate and develop positive relationships among researchers and key informants, stakeholders, and gate-

Using participant observation to develop interview questions

In a research study on HIV transmission, a researcher may observe that some men who approach women in a particular social setting are transient truck drivers, whereas others are local residents. Previously, researchers may not have known that women had sexual relationships with men who lived outside the community. This information could be used to develop more meaningful questions for interview guides. For example, researchers might now ask whether it is more or less difficult for women to negotiate condom use with truck drivers than with men who live in the community on a more permanent basis.

keepers, whose assistance and approval are needed for the study to become a reality. These relationships are essential to the logistics of setting up the study, including gaining permission from appropriate officials, and identifying and gaining access to potential study participants.

Researchers also use data collected through participant observation to improve the design of other methods, such as interviews and focus groups. For instance, they help to ensure the cultural relevance and appropriateness of interview and focus group questions.

Participant observation data are invaluable in determining whom to recruit for the study and how best to recruit them.

When acting as interviewers or focus group facilitators, researchers are guided by the cultural understanding gained through participant observation, allowing them to discern subtleties within participant responses. Knowing what these culturally specific cues mean allows the researcher to ask more appropriate follow-up questions and probes.

Participant observation data also provide a context for understanding data collected through other methods. In other words, they help researchers make sense of those other data. Participant observation may be done prior to other data collection, as well as simultaneously with other methods and during data analysis. For example, researchers might follow up on mention of a neighborhood with a high immigrant population by going there to do structured observation. Or, they might consult previously collected data that detail interactions between men and women in a public space, in order to shed light on a cryptic male focus group discussion about how men meet extramarital sex partners. Frequent consultation of participant observation data throughout a study can inform instrument design, save time, and prevent mistakes.

Ethical Guidelines

How much should I disclose about who I am and what I am doing?

When conducting participant observation, you should be discreet enough about who you are and what you are doing that you do not disrupt normal activity, yet open enough that the people you observe and interact with do not feel that your presence compromises their privacy. In

many situations, there is no reason to announce your arrival at the scene; in many others, however, it is essential that you openly state your identity and purpose. You should always alert relevant gatekeepers (community members in positions of official or unofficial authority) as to your presence and purpose. You should never be secretive or deliberately misleading about the research project or your role in it. If someone asks directly what you are doing, always provide a truthful response, using your judgment to gauge how exactly to handle a given situation. Be open, polite, and cognizant of your position as a guest or outsider.

There are no formal rules about disclosing your involvement in a research project while in casual conversation with community members, but it is usually advisable to do so. If you are at a bar, for example, you might spend a significant amount of time chatting with other people there. If someone begins talking to you about a topic related to the research, you might still continue to talk casually for a while. If it gets to the point where you want to ask specific questions and direct the conversation, however, then you should reveal your mission. Also, do not neglect to inform the person or persons of their right to refuse further discussion and of your commitment to confidentiality if they decide to continue talking with you.

How do I maintain confidentiality during participant observation?

As with all qualitative methods, researchers involved in participant observation must make a personal commitment to protect the identities of the people they observe or with whom they interact, even if informally. Maintaining confidentiality means ensuring that particular individuals can never be linked to the data they provide. This means that you must not record identifying information such as names and addresses of people you meet during participant observation. If it becomes necessary to get such information – for example, if the person wants you to telephone him or invites you to his home or workplace – it should not be included in the field notes that are entered into the computer. Similarly, it may be reasonable in some instances to record the names and locations of establishments – if, for example, follow-up observation will be required. These names and locations may be documented in field notes and shared with other research staff, but they should be coded and eliminated upon entry of the field notes into the computer, with the code list kept in a separate, secure computer file with limited access.

Sometimes, you may develop informal personal relationships with key informants. If that happens, be sure that no personal information they give you is ever included in the actual participant observation data. If you are unsure whether information they provide is appropriate for your official field notes, ask their permission.

Protecting participants' confidentiality also requires that researchers do not disclose personal characteristics that could allow others to guess the identities of people who played a role in the research. This dictates that you take great care not only in entering participant observation data into field notes but also when talking with other people in the community, whether for research purposes or otherwise. People may test you to see whether you disclose information by asking questions about things you may have seen or heard. Your refusal to divulge confidences will reassure them that you will protect their confidentiality as well. Participant confidentiality must also be respected during eventual presentation of the data in public dissemination events, as well as in printed publications.

How should informed consent be handled for participant observation?

It is not necessary to obtain formal informed consent for participant observation. However, when talking to people informally about the research and your role in it, it is important to emphasize that they are not required to talk to you and that there will be no repercussions if they do not. If your involvement with an individual appears to be progressing beyond participant observation to a formal interview, it is necessary to obtain informed consent before beginning an in-depth interview.

Logistics of Participant Observation

What are my responsibilities as a participant observer?

Researchers conducting participant observation need to be prepared and willing to adapt to a variety of uncontrolled situations and settings. How much you actively participate in activities versus observe them depends on the objectives and design of the specific project, on the circumstances in which you find yourself, and on your ability to blend in with the study population.

Your specific responsibilities include:

- observing people as they engage in activities that would probably occur in much the same way if you were not present
- engaging to some extent in the activities taking place, either in order to better understand the local perspective or so as not to call attention to yourself
- interacting with people socially outside of a controlled research environment, such as at a bar, public meeting place, bus depot, religious gathering, or market – if casual conversation gives way to more substantive discussion of the research topic, you would need to disclose your identity, affiliation, and purpose
- identifying and developing relationships with key informants, stakeholders, and gatekeepers

Is participant observation done individually or as a team?

Participant observation may be done individually, in pairs, and in teams – whichever arrangement is most appropriate for covering the locations and topics at issue. Factors often considered in determining the appropriate arrangement include the age, gender, physical appearance, ethnicity, personality, and linguistic abilities of different data collectors. The objective should be to gather data in the least obtrusive and most efficient manner possible, in light of the specific population and context.

One way to do participant observation is for members of a team to disperse to different locations individually, or in pairs or groups, to spend time doing focused observation to address particular questions. They can then reconvene to compare notes. From these notes, they can construct a more complete picture of the issues being studied. They might then create a map indicating places where some activity of interest was observed or where certain types of people go at different times of the day or week.

Where should I do participant observation?

Where you should go to do participant observation depends on the research goals. Generally, you should try to go where people in the study population often go in their daily lives, and if appropriate,

engage in the activity of interest. A key informant could tell you where those places are. For example, you might go where people in the study population seek medical care, socialize, eat, or shop. You could visit places where high-risk sexual activities are negotiated, such as discotheques or bars. Another option is to attend organized events such as religious services, municipal activities, and public information sessions. In team-based research, data collectors could decide to distribute themselves among observation sites that best match their ages and genders.

When should I do participant observation?

Participant observation is often done at the beginning of the data collection phase, but the method is also sometimes revisited later to address questions suggested by data collected using other methods. The best time to schedule participant observation sessions depends on what, whom, and where you need to observe. You may need to set up specific times based on when the particular activity takes place, such as on the day a weekly women's health clinic is scheduled at a local health facility. There might be specific times of day when an activity usually occurs, as at bars or public parks. It may also be important to observe the same population in several different locations and at different times.

Less structured, unscheduled participant observation may occur any time you are moving about the community and interacting with people. For example, you might talk to people at a bus stop while you, too, are waiting for a bus, or observe interactions between people at a market while you are doing your own shopping. You may wish to carry your notebook and a pen so that you can take advantage of spontaneous opportunities without relying completely on memory.

How long does participant observation take?

The specific duration of participant observation depends on the setting, activity, and population of interest. For example, the researcher might spend an hour, an afternoon, or a series of afternoons in a particular setting.

What is the difference between observing and participating?

This module's section on How to Be an Effective Participant Observer, page 22, includes detailed discussion of both how to observe and how to participate in a community activity. The basic difference between these two roles should be self-evident. In the first, you remain an "outsider" and simply observe and document the event or behavior being studied. In the second, you take part in the activity while also documenting your observations.

It is best to have some questions in mind before beginning participant observation. These topics and questions are typically provided for you or may be generated from team discussion about the research objectives. Generally, it is best to focus directly on observing behaviors and other factors that are most relevant to the research problem. For example, you might be advised to focus on the behaviors of male substance abusers, interactions between women and men, or the length of time individuals spend at a certain place. It may be helpful to create a checklist to help you remember what you are meant to observe. Table 3, page 20, suggests some general categories of information that are worth observing regardless of the research topic. These include individuals' general appearance, verbal and physical behaviors, personal space, human traffic at the observation site, and people who stand out.

Table 3. What to observe during participant observation

Category	Includes	Researchers should note
Appearance	Clothing, age, gender, physical appearance	Anything that might indicate membership in groups or in sub-populations of interest to the study, such as profession, social status, socioeconomic class, religion, or ethnicity
Verbal behavior and interactions	Who speaks to whom and for how long; who initiates interaction; languages or dialects spoken; tone of voice	Gender, age, ethnicity, and profession of speakers; dynamics of interaction
Physical behavior and gestures	What people do, who does what, who interacts with whom, who is not interacting	How people use their bodies and voices to communicate different emotions; what individuals' behaviors indicate about their feelings toward one another, their social rank, or their profession
Personal space	How close people stand to one another	What individuals' preferences concerning personal space suggest about their relationships
Human traffic	People who enter, leave, and spend time at the observation site	Where people enter and exit; how long they stay; who they are (ethnicity, age, gender); whether they are alone or accompanied; number of people
People who stand out	Identification of people who receive a lot of attention from others	The characteristics of these individuals; what differentiates them from others; whether people consult them or they approach other people; whether they seem to be strangers or well known by others present

The specifics of participating in a given community activity, compared to observing it, depend on each project. However, effectively participating typically requires blending in, interacting with people, and identifying individuals who may be good sources of information.

How do key informants figure into participant observation?

Another important aspect of participant observation is identifying key informants – local individuals who can directly provide important information about the community and thus help the researcher more quickly understand the study population and cultural environment. Key informants can facilitate your access to particular resources, populations, organizations, gatekeepers, etc., and can help you make connections between phenomena that might not be obvious to an outsider.

Key informants with personal connections to the study population can be invaluable. They may not be appropriate study participants themselves but may be willing to serve as liaisons to the community. For example, in a study involving male homosexual adolescents, an older member of the gay community could play a significant role in developing recruitment strategies by pointing researchers to key social spaces where these adolescents spend time and by explaining relevant social practices among them.

Researchers often find such individuals at a field site by chance. You might identify as a key informant someone toward whom other people seem to migrate, for example. You could even be approached by someone whose personality or social position makes him or her naturally inclined to interpret and communicate key aspects of the culture to outsiders.

If you eventually want to interview a key informant formally, rather than converse informally in a participant observation context, you need to follow procedures for conducting in-depth interviews, including obtaining informed consent. (See the module on In-Depth Interviews, page 29, for more information.)

How do I document what I learn during participant observation?

Documentation of participant observation data consists of field notes recorded in field notebooks. These data are records of what you experienced, what you learned through interaction with other people, and what you observed. Field notes should include an account of events, how people behaved and reacted, what was said in conversation, where people were positioned in relationship to one another, their comings and goings, physical gestures, your subjective responses to what you observed, and all other details and observations necessary to make the story of the participant observation experience complete. Field notes may be written either discreetly during participant observation or following the activity, depending on where you go and how much you participate. Whatever the case, notes should be expanded as soon as possible before your memory of the details fades. (This module's section on How to Be an Effective Participant Observer, page 22, includes more guidance for taking and expanding field notes. See also the Case Study Samples, page 26.)

You might also sketch a map of your observation site. You could indicate important establishments and locations, mark where certain activities were taking place, and places where follow-up observation is needed.

Audio and video recordings of participant observation are generally not permissible in applied public health or international development research activities because of ethical requirements for obtaining informed consent.

What should I do with my field notes?

As soon as possible after collecting participant observation data, you should expand whatever notes you were able to make into a descriptive narrative. If you plan to do participant observation late in the evening, make sure that you will have time the next morning to expand your notes. (See the section in this module on How to Be an Effective Participant Observer, page 22. See also the Case Study Samples, page 26.) Include as many details as possible. You will not have been able to write down everything that transpired and that you observed, and maybe not anything at all, if you were participating quite actively.

Alternatively, rather than expanding your notes, you might be asked to share your notes with other members of the research team to produce a joint product, such as an ethnographic map of an area.

Once you have expanded your notes, either you or a typist hired for the project will need to type your field notes into a computer file. The notebook and hard copy of the typed data should then be stored in a secure location (along with maps and any other products of participant observation).

(See the module on Data Documentation and Management, page 83, for procedures related to computer files and data security.)

When should I share my data with the research team?

Frequent sharing of data from participant observation among researchers helps the study team to become familiar with the context and study population, to identify unanticipated but potential problems and issues related to carrying out the project successfully, and to adjust procedures as necessary.

Team meetings typically take place throughout data collection but are more frequent at the beginning of a project. At such meetings, be prepared to discuss what you have seen, raise questions about the meaning or implications of your observations, and suggest how your observations might be followed up in interviews, focus groups, or in further observation. Also, discuss any logistical or security concerns that emerge. The local principal investigator will also review participant observation data to get a sense of how things are going in the field, identify areas that may be over- or under-observed, and identify any other issues that need to be addressed. Be sure to share with the principal investigator any nuances of your participant observation experience that seem important.

How to Be an Effective Participant Observer

Participant observation data are only as good as researchers' observations, descriptions, and notes. Getting these data requires that participant observers be prepared, know how to gauge their behavior, be objective, take good notes, and use the data throughout data collection activities, including those associated with other methods.

How do I prepare for participant observation?

First, know what the research is about. A thorough understanding of the study will help you stay focused during participant observation. Once you have a clear idea of what the research is about, you can determine specific objectives for the participant observation activity. It may be useful to create a list of things to pay attention to, and either write it in your field notebook or keep it in your pocket for quick reference. Note, however, that it is most important to keep your eyes open for scenarios you had not expected to encounter, which may suggest new directions for the research.

In preparing for the participant observation activity, it is useful to find out as much as you can about the site where you will be participating or observing and about any activities in which you might participate. If necessary, visit the scene and make initial observations before you set up your official data collection time.

Also, take some time to rehearse how you will describe or explain yourself and your purpose, if necessary. Similarly, establish in advance your own personal shorthand conventions – that is, how you will indicate and abbreviate the words and concepts you are likely to use in your note-taking. Know how you will separate your objective observations from your interpretations; how you will indicate men, women, and children, and their ages; and so forth. (More information on taking field notes is presented later in this section.)

How should I behave during participant observation?

The most important behavioral principle in participant observation is to be discreet. Try not to stand out or to affect the natural flow of activity. One way to do this is to behave in a way similar to the people around you, such as praying in a religious setting or drinking in a bar. It also helps to be aware of local meanings for particular body language (positions and gestures, for example) and tones of voice, as well as what types of physical and eye contact are locally appropriate in different situations.

Field staff engaged in participant observation always need to use good judgment in determining whether to participate in certain types of activities. You should not engage in illegal or sexual activities with study participants, for example. You should exercise caution about the amount of alcohol you consume in a social setting. It may be socially appropriate to buy a beer for someone or to accept their offer to buy you one, but it may not be necessary to actually consume alcohol in any quantity.

What should I document?

Simply put, document what you observe, taking care to distinguish it from both your expectations and your interpretation of what you observe.

It is important to document what is actually taking place rather than what you were expecting to see and to not let your expectations affect your observations. The purpose of participant observation is partly to confirm what you already know (or think you know) but is mostly to discover unanticipated truths. It is an exercise of discovery.

Also, avoid reporting your interpretation rather than an objective account of what you observe. To interpret is to impose your own judgment on what you see. For example, an interpretive description of a street corner might be that it was “dirty and overly crowded.” An objective description would be that “there was garbage everywhere and there were so many people around that it was difficult to move.” The danger of not separating interpretation from observation is that your interpretations can turn out to be wrong. This can lead to invalid study results, which can ultimately be damaging for the study population. You can work on reporting neutral observations by questioning yourself often about your assertions. Ask yourself, “What is my evidence for this claim?”

Distinguishing interpretation from observation

A North American researcher is hired to observe the behavior of young men in an African country. He notices a lot of handholding and displays of mutual affection between these men. Because of his American background, he interprets these data to mean that many young men in this country are homosexual. Although this might be a logical interpretation in North America, it is not logical for the African country. Thus, the observations are correct, but his interpretation is not, and any policies or programs based on his interpretation would be invalid.

How do I take field notes?

Handwritten notes, later converted into computer files, are often the only way to document certain participant observation activities, such as informal or spontaneous interviews, observation, and generally moving about in the field. Notes from participant observation – like those from interviews and focus groups – are called “field notes,” and they are written directly into field notebooks. The tips on page 24 offers some suggestions for formatting and writing field notes.

How do I expand my notes?

Following each participant observation event, data collectors need to expand their notes into rich descriptions of what they have observed. (See the Case Study Samples, page 26.) This involves transforming your raw notes into a narrative and elaborating on your initial observations, a task most conveniently done using a computer. If no computer is available within a day or so, you should expand your notes by hand. Eventually, all expanded notes should be typed into computer files using a specific format, as discussed in the module on Data Documentation and Management, page 83.

Expanding your notes involves the following:

- *Scheduling time to expand your notes*, preferably within 24 hours from the time field notes are made. If you cannot expand your notes the same day as data collection, try to do so first thing the next morning. This makes it less likely that you will forget what an abbreviation stands for or that you will have trouble remembering what you meant. Also, the sooner you review your notes, the greater the chance that you will remember other things that you had not written down. Good note-taking often triggers the memory, but with the passage of time, this opportunity is lost.
- *Expanding your shorthand into sentences* so that anyone can read and understand your notes. Use a separate page in your field notebook if necessary. Depending on circumstances, you might be able to expand and type your notes into a computer file at the same time.
- *Composing a descriptive narrative from your shorthand and key words*. A good technique for expanding your notes is to write a narrative describing what happened and what you learned about the study population and setting. This narrative may be the actual document you produce as your expanded notes. Be sure that you create separate, clearly labeled sections to report your objective observations versus your interpretations and personal comments.

TIPS

Tips for taking field notes

Begin each notebook entry with the date, time, place, and type of data collection event.

Leave space on the page for expanding your notes, or plan to expand them on a separate page. (See the section above on “How do I expand my notes?”)

Take notes strategically. It is usually practical to make only brief notes during data collection. Direct quotes can be especially hard to write down accurately. Rather than try to document every detail or quote, write down key words and phrases that will trigger your memory when you expand notes.

Use shorthand. Because you will expand and type your notes soon after you write them, it does not matter if you are the only person who can understand your shorthand system. Use abbreviations and acronyms to quickly note what is happening and being said.

Cover a range of observations. In addition to documenting events and informal conversations, note people’s body language, moods, or attitudes; the general environment; interactions among participants; ambiance; and other information that could be relevant.

- *Identifying questions for follow-up.* Write down questions about participant responses that need further consideration or follow-up, issues to pursue, new information, etc. This continual adjustment of the research questions and techniques is part of the iterative nature of qualitative research.
- *Reviewing your expanded notes and adding any final comments.* If you have not typed your expanded notes directly into a computer file, add any additional comments on the same page or on a separate page. If you use additional pages, be sure to clearly cross-reference new notes with the original pages in case another staff member types your notes.



Suggested Readings

Bogdewic SP. Participant observation. In Crabtree BF, Miller W (eds.). *Doing Qualitative Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1992.

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Spradley J. *Participant Observation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1980.

Winstein RM. The mental hospital from the patient's point of view. In Gove WR (ed.). *Deviance and Mental Illness*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1982.

For additional information on this topic, refer to Chapter 4. Collecting Qualitative Data: The Science and the Art in these companion guides:

Qualitative Methods in Public Health: A Field Guide for Applied Research

Qualitative Methods: A Field Guide for Applied Research in Sexual and Reproductive Health

Sample Participant Observation Field Notes

Arch # CCP001
Capital City Hospital

14-6-04
start 8:00 am
end 10:15 am

Antenatal clinic for hospital, offices 3 sides of lg waiting area. Govt offices 1 side Mrs. X head nurse, are other study nurses Sm waiting area off main, has TV-video. Clinic has 2 HIV videos, very popular, women stay to watch after seen
Mon & Fri - antenatal (busier)

Tues - hi risk

pm → teen pregnancy

Wed - test results

STI treatment m & w

- men shy b/c all wa
(don't want come)

Nurses want men treated

STI clinic crowded

long wait

Sample Expanded Field Notes

Archival #: CCP001
Site: Capital City Hospital
Data collector: Anna S.
Typist: Brian L.
Date: 14-6-04
Start: 08:00 a.m.
End: 10:15 a.m.

When we arrived, we went first to the antenatal clinic where several xxxxxx projects are located, including xxxx, xxx, and the xxxxxxxx study. The projects occupy rooms on three sides of the large waiting area, which was largely empty. When we arrived there were seven women in the main waiting area, listening to a nurse give a health talk. A few more women arrived as the talk progressed.

We were met by Mrs. xxxxxxx, the head nurse, and introduced to several of the other study nurses.

There is a small waiting area off the main waiting area for the xxx project, which includes a recently acquired TV/VCR. This was playing when we arrived, and there were a number of women gathered around watching throughout our visit. They have two HIV videos which the staff said are very popular and that the women will stay after their study visits to watch.

Monday and Friday are general antenatal clinic days at the hospital and are therefore busier. Tuesday morning is for high-risk clients and the afternoon is a teen pregnancy clinic. On Wednesday clients return for test results. It was unclear to me what happens on Thursday.

Women are tested for STIs, and treatment is provided to both women and their partners; however, men are usually shy about coming to the clinic because it is all women. The nurses prefer to have the partners come to XXX so they can make sure they are treated. The STI clinic has a long wait and is crowded ...

Participant Observation Steps

Preparing for Participant Observation

- 1 Determine the purpose of the participant observation activity as related to the overall research objectives.
- 2 Determine the population(s) to be observed.
- 3 Consider the accessibility of the population(s) and the venues in which you would like to observe them.
- 4 Investigate possible sites for participant observation.
- 5 Select the site(s), time(s) of day, and date(s), and anticipate how long you will collect participant observation data on each occasion.
- 6 Decide how field staff will divide up or pair off to cover all sites most effectively.
- 7 Consider how you will present yourself, both in terms of appearance and how you will explain your purpose to others if necessary.
- 8 Plan how and if you will take notes during the participant observation activity.
- 9 Remember to take your field notebook and a pen.

After Participant Observation

- 10 Schedule time soon after participant observation to expand your notes.
- 11 Type your notes into computer files using the standard format set for the study.

