Geomethodology: Participant Observation

GEOG 5161 Research Design
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Definition

“A method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture.”

(DeWalt and DeWalt 2011)
Why Participant Observation?

Strengths: Enhance the quality of data collection and interpretation

- Establish trust between the researcher and research subjects
- Nuanced understandings of the everyday life (“tacit” knowledge) and “explicit” knowledge
- Practiced in combination with other methods
Weaknesses

- Time consuming
- Potential obstacles to establish trust and access research sites
- Ethical issues
Research Questions

- Questions address contemporary issues with an experimental nature
- Most commonly used in descriptive and interpretive research approaches;
- Applicable in grounded theory approach

(DeWalt and DeWalt 2011)
Doing Participant Observation

- An extensive emersion in the context
- Learning and using local language and dialect
- Engagement in daily interactions with full participants (e.g. “hanging out” with locals)
- Interviews embedded in everyday conversation
- Writing fieldnotes as data generation and analysis
Participation + Observation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Continuum of Participation</th>
<th>Membership Roles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonparticipation</td>
<td>No membership role</td>
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<tr>
<td>Passive participation</td>
<td>No membership role</td>
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<tr>
<td>Active participation</td>
<td>Peripheral membership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Complete participation</td>
<td>Full membership</td>
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(Spradley 1970; Adler and Adler 1987)
Death Without Weeping
THE VIOLENCE OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN BRAZIL
NANCY SCHEPER-HUGHES

LEARNING TO LABOR
HOW WORKING CLASS KIDS GET WORKING CLASS JOBS
by Paul Willis
With an introduction by Stanley Aronowitz
But...

“Our intellectual mission is deeply paradoxical: get the ‘native point of view’...without actually ‘going’ native...”

“Our methodology, defined by the oxymoron ‘participant observation’ is a split at the root: act as a participant, but don’t forget to keep your eyes open...”

The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that breaks your heart (Behar 1996, 5)
Issues in Participant Observation

Malinowski in the field
What Makes Participant Observation Problematic?

- Positionality, reflexivity, and the “burden of authorship” (Geertz 1995; Behar 1996, 7)

- “Cultural shock” (DuBois 1951; Oberg 1954) and “Reentry shock” (Ward et al. 2001)

- “Being on” (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011)

- Research subjects: vulnerable groups (e.g. children, prisoners)

- Research Ethics
Some Ongoing Issues

The ethics of openness: How informed is “informed consent”?

Editor's note: In this final post for February's 'Openness Ed' takes us on a journey with her to the homes of her research really important questions about the wild "foreign languages" supposedly produces "informed consent", about the genesis practice of informed consent and challenges us to think about informed consent in our own projects.

Link: http://ethnographymatters.net/2013/03/01/the-ethics-of-openness/
Related Literature

- Participant observation in geographical literature:

- Online sources: [Ethnography Matters](#)

- Methodological literature: