



PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND

SOCIAL CRITICISM

Participant observation, as a method of sociological research, has been subjected to an appraisal from all sides that has effectively relegated it to a sociological hobby. This is not, as has often been argued, due to the failure to attach itself to a particular social philosophy. Such failure has meant that the practitioners of the method have no clearly stated objectives to which to orient their work. To say that participant observation is a method in search of a philosophy would be to overstate the case for two reasons. First, the method developed out of a profound dissatisfaction with the prevalent structured interview method and its intrinsic failure to grasp meaning contexts. Secondly the method implicitly relates to a particular style of work, it just needs clarifying.

Much of the confusion about the relevance of participant observation for sociology stems from the hovering, and defensive attitude of its most prolific advocates who hail from Chicago University. The ambiguity surrounding the philosophical basis of the method is best exemplified by the work of Howard Becker. In an article jointly written with Blanche Geer, Becker purports to present a case for participant observation wherein he argues its superiority over scheduled interviewing. They state:

'The most complete form of sociological datum, after all, is the form in which the participant observer gathers it. An observation of some social event, the events which precede and follow it, and explanations of its meaning by participants and spectators, before, during and after its occurrence. Such a datum gives us more information about the event under study than data gathered by any other sociological method. Participant observation can thus provide us with a yardstick against which to measure the completeness of data gathered in other ways, a model which can serve to let us know what orders of information escape us when we use other methods'.

(Becker 1957, page 133)

A promising start and one which simply screams out for philosophical elaboration. Unfortunately the article comes to an ambivalent conclusion, when, after consistently arguing that interviewing lacks the sensitivity of the participant observation method, they say

'interviewers can profit from an awareness of those limitations of their method suggested by this comparison and perhaps improve their batting average by taking account of them'

(Becker 1957, page 142)

As if this were not enough to make the reader dismiss the article as nothing more than yet another attack on the 'tried and trusted' method of the market researcher, then a final footnote to their conclusion, certainly should:

'we are aware that participant observation raises as many technical problems as it solves ... We feel, however, that there is considerable value in using the strong points of one method to illuminate the shortcoming of another'.

(Becker 1957, page 142)

Throughout the article, and the ensuing rejoinder to Martin Trow's comments, Becker and Geer fail to explicitly place the method within a philosophical framework, implicitly they accept a positivistic stance and attempt to compete with the interview on its own ground. As they say, they

'have no intention of denigrating the interview or even such less precise modes of gathering data as the questionnaire ... we simply wish to make explicit the differences in data gathered by one or the other method and suggest the differing uses to which they may be put'. (Becker 1957, pages 133-4)

and this they do in parochial fashion, arguing principally, the pragmatic difficulties of interviewing deviant groups, concluding in their rejoinder

'we do not argue that participant observation should be used in all studies but simply that it is possible to tell by comparison with the data it produces what data is lost by use of another method'. (Becker 1957, page 151)

And so the myth developed that the method remained applicable only to fringe studies, that it should be an exploratory method, and that it had no role to play as an explanatory method. The extreme statement of this indictment of the method suggests that it is nothing more than sociological romanticism, an indictment that cuts much deeper now that there is an explicit cynicism directed towards anti-culture intellectualism.

Neither Becker nor Geer have made any concerted effort to present the method outside the constricting presuppositions of positivism, in fact Geer, in an analysis of the initial stages of fieldwork, attempts to relate the method directly to the positivistic hypothesis testing approach. (Geer 1964)

Polsky, who decries such 'scientism' and is one of the most ardent supporters of the method in the field of criminology deplores the failure of 'quantitative' sociologists to talk about people. They are, he says, solely concerned with punched holes and data. Is he suggesting that the use of the quantitative method fails to probe intended meaning? If so, like Becker, and so many other exponents of participant observation, he fails to come out and say so. Polsky, possibly more than any other practicing participant observer, considers the method as such, within the context of interpretive sociology, and without any apparent feelings of being obliged to justify it vis a vis scheduled interviewing, or within the positivistic context. As such he is a rare case and outside the scope of Phillipson's general comments when he remarks that

'The one method which would seem to provide the greatest opportunity for studying the processual character of social life, participant observation, is the method most frowned upon and regarded with suspicion in the canons of conventional methodology, because it fails to meet their limited criteria of objectivity. Unfortunately this has meant that participant observers have been put on the defensive; the result has been that most defenders have been put in a position of justifying the technique according to the terms of conventional methodology rather than presenting an independent case for it'.

(Phillipson 1972, page 102)

Despite his avowed stand against scientism, and his advocacy of the method on its own merits, Polsky, nonetheless confines his expressed support to the narrow field of criminology with a view to assessing the career aspect of criminal behaviour.

Herbert Blumer supports participant observation as a method from a Symbolic Interactionist perspective. Not at all happy with the scientism of the survey method he reasserted the need for science to be empirically grounded, (Blumer 1969). Being restrained by scientific protocol, he argued, is useless if it does not allow for an open investigation of the social world. He therefore demanded the naturalistic approach to sociological investigation, whereby any method is applicable provided it allows the researcher to get his subject into perspective and enables him to develop his typifications of the subject. Participant observation, Blumer argued, was a prime method in developing the naturalistic approach. Ironically the continual exposition, testing and refining of hypothesis required by Blumer's perspective, was the main theme up by Becker in putting the case for participant observation within the more general positivistic approach to sociology. One can only wonder if his students really understood Blumer's larger conception. Perhaps it would have been more helpful if Blumer had been more explicit about social issues.

A more general exponent of the method of participant observation who provides us with an exception to the tendency to cower within the positivistic convention is Servyn Bruyn. Bruyn, a phenomenologically oriented sociologist, although feeling constrained to compare observation with interviewing, argues that participant observation is able to answer at least some of the questions designed to grasp subjective meaning. He sees the method as being able to illustrate the social drama as it appears to the actors, to make explicit their perspectives and their assumptions about the social world they are involved in. He is then, alone in relating the method to a philosophy; although this relationship was never rigorously conceived.

Clearly, then, participant observation is a method with no obvious philosophical base. It had been considered within the narrowest conception of Positive sociology, as a method whereby hypotheses may be generated and tested. As such it has received more scorn than praise, at best being relegated to an exploratory approach needing a more scientific method to substantiate its impressions. It has also been considered as a process whereby intended meaning may be construed. In its more limited sense it is a prime method of the symbolic interactionist approach, but this approach itself is being subsumed under the more comprehensive and refined phenomenological sociology.

Mead's thesis, central to symbolic interactionism has been confirmed, extended and made more sophisticated by phenomenologists, and participant observation has not emerged as a central method within the phenomenological style. Even within symbolic interactionism it tended more towards being an exploratory method, a precursor typification, a means by which a scientific approach to the meanings of shared definitions of social situations, could be developed. Within the more explicit schemata of interpretive sociology, as initially conceived by Weber and given systematic expression by Schutz, participant observation, as a method, is clearly relegated to a pre-scientific role, as the direct social experience prior to the construction of the scientific ideal type. Similarly, Garfinkel and the loosely termed 'Ethnomethodologists' have subsumed the method at a preliminary stage of their conception of phenomenological sociology, reasserting, instead, the social experiment.

But participant observation is not just a sociological curio, it has a role to play, a role within a style of sociological work that surpasses the scope of Positive sociology and Phenomenological sociology, as part of a sociological style that asks not what and how, but why? The sociological imagination needs participant observation for its development. In its endeavour to relate biography to history, social criticism cannot be content with survey data nor ideal typifications, it needs the perspectivization of participant observation in order to

comprehend social meanings within the comparative historical framework. C. Wright Mills could not have written the 'Power Elite' (C. Wright Mills 1956) without systematic observation and social interaction with the people he was writing about. Social criticism does not relegate participant observation to pre-scientific status, on the contrary, participant observation is intrinsic to the style. It is the fundamental process whereby individuals and groups are analysed, their problems explicated, and their relationship to the social structure clarified. By looking at the individual in the group, the group within the social structure and the social structure in the historical process, the issues of society can be related to the individual. Those sociologists who restrain the participant observation within microscopic studies, following the dictates of the Positive critique are allowing their lack of imagination to stultify a valuable sociological method.

- BECKER 1957 Howard Becker and Blanche Geer 'Participant Observation and Interviewing: A comparison' in Filstead (ed) 'Quantitative Methodology' (Chicago: Markham, 1970).
- BLUMER 1969 Herbert Blumer 'Symbolic Interactionisms: Perspective and Method (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall 1969).
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1956 C. Wright Mills 'The Power Elite' (New York; Oxford University Press, 1956).

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Participant Observation and Social Criticism : A Response

First of all, I welcome Lee's article as an exploration of the difficult problem of the relationship between a researcher's methods and the theoretical system within which the work is carried out. On the one hand, it seems tempting to say that any method can be used in conjunction with any theory - especially in research methods courses, where the methods are usually discussed in a way that is largely detached from examination of the growth and development of theoretical systems. On the other hand, it seems clear that the sort of "commitments" that may differentiate theoretical systems - for example, a view of the person as largely shaped in a passive way by external forces, as opposed to a view that emphasises the person's construction of a meaningful world, and consequent actions - may also differentiate social research "methods". Thus, an experiment which measures differing "responses" to a treatment or "stimulus" seems to be much more aligned with the former view of the person, whereas participant observation which emphasis social interaction with the "actors" being studied, in their social situation, over time - seems much more appropriate for assessing the form and development of the system of "meaning" of individual and group. (I am not suggesting that a researcher or practitioner has to choose one or other extreme on the "active-passive" dimension discussed here - simply that a position on this and other dimensions will be part of one's theoretical commitments, and will inform one's choice of methods.)

My second point follows from the fact that a certain amount of power is necessary to obtain a "response" from people in any style of research. Much experimentation in psychology has been done with students who were compelled to take part, as part of their course work necessary to receive a grade - or with local people who were recruited through adverts and paid a nominal amount (for example, 4 for one hour by Milgram - in his mid-sixties study of Obedience to Authority); the recruiting difficulty of course leads to enormous difficulties of generalising the results.

In participant observation, the researcher requires permission to enter the social world of those he would study - or else has to do it covertly, which raises ethical issues. In some cases, of course, neither permitted nor covert entry is possible; e.g. to Cabinet meetings, gatherings of the military chiefs of staff, or another other situation where "security" operates. Thus it is various power structures and not just sociologists, who "restrain participant observation within microscopic studies" (final page of Lee's article). Perhaps participant observers cannot hope to study "top-security" situations, and must rely on reports from "legitimate" participants, e.g. memoirs? In any case, the method still seems admirably suited for studying the way a particular "macro" phenomenon is experienced in a specific social context; for example, unemployment in an Austrian Village during the Depression (Lazarsfeld, Jahoda, and Zeisel (1933), Marienthal) and progressive education in a South London School (Sharp and Green (1975), Education and Social Control).