

## Participant Observation



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### Synonyms

[Insider observation](#); [Observer participation](#); [Participatory participation](#); [Participation in research](#); [Participatory ethnography](#); [Participatory fieldwork](#)

### Definition/Description

Participant Observation (PO) is a technique or method that involves immersing the researcher in the field of work to directly understand the daily life of otherness, whether from a perspective internal or external to the group studied. Its origins date back to the early twentieth century, consolidated through the studies of the Chicago School. Since then, it has a long history of applications in geography; some geographers have been reluctant to incorporate their field experiences into their research, while others recognize the suitability of PO for the study of human geography. PO has expanded into new fields of research, such as mobile methods and digital PO. A recent variant of PO involves the incorporation of sensoriality

and perception as dimensions for knowing, learning, and understanding everyday life.

### The Beginnings

Participant Observation (PO) is understood as a technique or method for directly understanding the everyday life of otherness, whether from an insider or outsider perspective. Indeed, authors such as Spradley (1980) have defended PO as a research technique that allows for building a deep understanding of a specific culture. Denzin (1989) and Atkinson and Hammersley (2007) consider PO as a research method that requires the researcher's complete immersion in the field of work, as well as a subsequent critical analysis of the data collected. In fact, Denzin (1989) explicitly names it as one of the five main methods of the sociologist's profession, to which he adds experiments, surveys, and life histories. PO has its origins in modern anthropology, although it was consolidated with the studies developed by the Chicago School (Santos et al., 2010). The origins of OP date back to the 1910s and 1920s, a period marked by the work of British social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski and the subsequent rise of cultural relativism, a timeframe in which anthropological orthodoxy abolished the distance between observer and observed, integrating both into fieldwork.

## The OP and Geography

OP has a history of application in geography. Geographer P. Jackson (1983) emphasized that anthropology and geography shared a commitment to fieldwork and, specifically, to the use of OP. Although some geographers, such as D. Harvey, D. Gregory, and D. Ley, have been reluctant to incorporate their field experiences into their research, other geographers (Mercer and Powell, 1972, in Jackson, 1983) had already recognized the suitability of OP for the study of human geography issues, enabling geographers to go beyond a merely positivist perspective. OP was then proposed as a technique that "...offers the researcher a means of securing their data within the media, symbols, and experiential worlds that are meaningful to their respondents" (Vidich, 1955, in Jackson, 1983, p. 44). The idea that OP contributed to the construction of a new human geography that, contextualized in the phenomenological tradition, made use of concepts such as intersubjectivity and worldviews was also defended (Jackson, 1983).

Since the 2000s, OP has favored a much more inductive approach in geography. In the words of Lorda (2011), OP has improved the application of tools that position the researcher in the field. Therefore, it is suggested that, just as OP favors the inductive approach, the latter favors OP, so they are interdependent. Particularly in human geography, OP has been incorporated more recently as a tool that, complemented by traditional methods of spatial analysis, is relevant for studying current geographic problems. An example of this is the possibility of incorporating subjective aspects, such as experiences and emotions, into urban studies (Pellicer et al., 2013). With the emergence of so-called "mobile methods" (Sheller and Urry, 2006), geography moved from OP to mobile participant OP. This shift interested many geographers, who integrated co-present forms of observing and participating as the people being observed moved into their research (Novoa, 2015). Walking-with, following, accompanying, leading-along, moving video, and so on were some of the techniques used within these moving POs (Jain, 2009; Laurier 2004; Spinney, 2011; Watts & Lyons 2011).

## The Recent

Another of these variants is what Pink (2009) calls "participant's sensory practices," a type of OP practices articulated by informants that, rather than referring solely to the plane of observation, also incorporate sensorialities and perceptions as dimensions for knowing, learning, and understanding their everyday lives. This is consistent with Grasseni's (2004) observation that OP involves "sharing a sensory learning process to understand—and even appropriate, to a certain extent, the "ways of seeing" of the ethnographic subject" (p. 16). Just as OP has undergone adjustments and variations over time, it has not been immune to debates about its advantages and limitations. It highlights the approach to key spaces of culture, which is called by DeMunck and Sobo (1998) as access to the "culture behind the scenes" (p. 43), allowing access to more complete, detailed and situated data of the realities under study, which would be more difficult to access through the use of other techniques (Piñeiro, 2015). These advantages can be enhanced by complementing OP with additional techniques, such as interviews, document analysis, surveys, among others. For its part, some disadvantages of OP are related to the tensions between direct and empirical participation, and the analytical distance from desk work (Jociles, 1999), which makes it difficult, in a way, to maintain objectivity in the field (Jackson, 1983), increasing the possibility that the researcher's subjectivity influences the informants (Fernández, 2009). Some have also added the ethical dilemmas linked to access, the consent of those observed, and the role of the researcher who applies OP (Martínez, 2022; Robledo, 2009). OP continues to be a key resource that has been adapted and adjusted to current contexts. Today, it is no longer strictly necessary for researchers to travel to distant contexts (geographically and culturally), as global dynamics and technologies have brought many ways of life closer together and standardized them. Furthermore, OP has spread to new fields of research, not only through mobile methods but also into the virtual world, where digital OPs are

developed that seek to understand social interactions in technology-mediated environments.

## Cross-References

- [Affect and Geography](#)
- [Behavioral Geography](#)
- [Chicago School](#)
- [Cultural Ecology](#)
- [Cultural Geography](#)
- [Cultural Landscape](#)
- [Emotions and Geography](#)
- [Ethnicity and Geography](#)
- [Fieldwork in Geography](#)
- [Geohumanities](#)
- [Humanistic Geography](#)
- [Identity and Geography](#)
- [Imaginative Geographies](#)
- [Interviewing and Geography](#)
- [Mental Maps](#)
- [Mobility](#)
- [Non-Representational Geographies](#)
- [Ontology and Geography](#)
- [Participatory Methods](#)
- [Phenomenology](#)
- [Posthumanism and Geography](#)
- [Qualitative Methods in Geography](#)
- [Radical Geography](#)
- [Rural Geography](#)
- [Spatial Turn](#)
- [Time-Space Compression](#)

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