

Ethnographic Participant Observation

Ethnographic participant observation serves as a way learn about different perspectives of members of a group, tribe or culture. There are two main tasks that need to be fulfilled with this type of research, namely to deeply understand the perspectives of those involved in the study and to grasp the connection that each member has with all other members within the group. But the way that the research is conducted is very unique in order to get the most accurate and “natural” results. The researcher will conduct the study in the environment being researched. “Because observational research does not intervene in the activities of the people being studied (Alder & Alder, 2000), ethnography is, in particular, suitable to investigating sensitive issues because such work can provide rich, detailed descriptions about the unknown or the little known. As the only field method that allows researchers to observe what people do in “real life” contexts, not what they say what they do, ethnographic participant observation can supply detailed, authentic information unattainable by any other research method.” (Li, p. 101) The study can range from weeks, to months and sometimes even years. There, the researcher will either become an outsider or an insider of the culture. Outsiders will tend to observe and listen to what is happening within the culture. Those being observed will most likely know what is being observed and what the research is about. On the other hand, those researchers taking the role as an insider rarely compromise their research, to those that are being researched. The researcher will actually become a member of the community and learn the culture as if they were becoming a member of that community. The members of the community are unaware of the research being conducted, and are under the impression that the “researcher” is another member. This often times raises ethical questions since the members are unable to consent to the research being conducted. However, it does create a way for the members to be completely natural in their environment, without being influenced with the thought of “research” being done on or about them.

No matter the role that is taken from the researcher, the method of data collection seems to be fairly consistent, and heavily weighted in qualitative data. Researchers will, with as much detail as possible, record anything that happens within the community. These notes are objective and never draw on conclusions or judgments. The research may record conversations or traditions, transcribe informal interviews as well. Any method that will provide “evidence” of the community and its working components will be used to present the culture in an objective light. The importance of the data is the frequency that the data is collected. When in a community, conducting participate observation, everything needs to be recorded. If it does not make sense at the time, it is still important, because it may be related to another event in the future.

The insight that is obtained from participant observation is unique in the potential depth of understanding. Due to the fact that participant observation is quite involved in the data collection, one would anticipate that a great amount of learning result from this high level of

inquiry. Mary Bateson, a anthropologist who spends a great amount of her life studying and observing different cultures through participant observations notes, “*Insight*, I believe, refers to that depth of understanding that comes by setting experiences, yours and mine, familiar and exotic, new and old, side by side, learning by letting them speak to one another.” (Bateson, pg. 14) From participant observation, one has the opportunity to experience another culture/community, but to actually take that experience and learning something from it takes much more reflection. Learning by experience occurs when one has the ability and the reflection capabilities to connect two or more situations, normally distant in time, to each other. Learning, from participant observation, becomes less about building knowledge from what is observed and more about learning how situations are related and connected to each other. But it is vital to have a sense of peripheral vision to partake in this type of complex learning. A deep level of inquiry needs to force the participants to look beyond the immediate reaction, to ask deeper questions with every situation presented.

Simply “experiencing” this vast arrangement of situations is not enough to be “educated.” Being able to connect situations to one another is vital, but equally as vital to the success of learning is the ability to multi-task, when experiencing these new and somewhat similar situations. When one multi-tasks, as Bateson explains, one has the ability to view different components of one situation all at once. This concept of multi-tasking needs to be applied to ethnographic participant observation as well. Instead of focusing on one aspect of a situation, one needs to view the situation from multiple perspectives. For example, “Peripheral Visions: Learning along the way” begins with an image of a goat being sacrificed. Knowing that a goat is sacrificed is not enough. Rather, to a trained eye, one must have a wide enough peripheral vision to see the different tasks that each person has, during this ritual, and how each person connects to the entire group. Likewise, one would quickly, and foolishly be shocked at the strict gender roles that are portrayed in the Maori tribe, seen in *Whale Rider*. However, if an approach is taken from multiple viewpoints, it is much easier to understand the importance of gender roles, and how each member of the tribe feels about the gender roles. For some, it takes a great amount of time and dedication to train oneself to view the entire picture, versus obsess over one component of it. However, this training is necessary to have peripheral vision that not only defies time restraints, but also is wide enough to learn from the entire experience. Together, these components allow one to learn from participant observation, rather than simply “experiencing” another community.

Moreover, these cultures and communities that can be “experienced” through participant observation stretches far beyond cultures, tribes or groups of people. Professions, like the education community, can also be studied through 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.” (www.fhi.org, pg 14) In the education field, along with any other “community,” participants have a vision of what is occurring in their classroom. All educators would like to believe, for example, that they are treating race, gender and social backgrounds with equality and fairness, but unfortunately, this is not always the situation. Participant observation allows researchers the opportunity to objectively present the data that either supports or does not support those claims. Once the data is reflected upon, teachers, school systems, districts and even entire states can determine appropriate manners to respond to the results. For example, English/Language Arts end-of-grade test scores for minority students have been significantly lower than the test scores from majority students in their grade level. The question that begs to be answered is why? Is it because there is not enough of a demand for higher education for minority students, or is it because their culture does has much different expectations than those expectations of other ethnic groups? Although these are very sensitive topics, participant observation, when conducted appropriately and effectively, can serve as an avenue to help answer these questions. “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.” (www.fhi.org, pg 14) At times, participant observation could lead to deeper levels of research as well. Hypothetically speaking, if it was found that the test scores for the minority students was lower because of lower educational expectations, the researcher could then open up the research to determine what area of the child’s life is it rooted from.

The benefit of conducting these “mini” participant observations is that it allows almost any person to conduct the research. For example, many education preparation programs through college and universities require prospective teachers to observe other teachers. Although these observations are rarely directed in a manner that limits what the student is observing and what questions are to be answered, the programs could easily have that be an option. Schools and even districts could also organize in a manner that allows teachers to observe fellow teachers within their school and/or district to attempt to answer “sensitive” questions. The caution to this is that it would need to be clarified that “researchers” need to be objective and not make any conclusions about those that are being observed. It would be necessary to offer training on the effective ways to conduct participant observations. The comparisons would be between different schools, ethnic backgrounds, social class, or even by gender versus in terms of entire cultures.

However, Bateson feels most strongly about connecting two different cultures to each other. Moreover, when different cultures are compared and contrasted objectively, it allows us to make sense of both cultures at a much deeper level. Education is very much so an integral part of every culture, whether one is studying how mother and infant react to each other, or how standards differ from country to country, a great amount of insight can be gained when observing and reflecting on these differences. What is natural to one culture seems obscure to another. However, the recognition of these differences requires one to not only experience their own

culture, other cultures, but more importantly, look beyond those two separate cultures and allow them to provide reason to each other. Bateson does this by allowing her students the opportunity to observe two different mother-child pairs, from different cultures. From these opportunities, “the mothers too had quite different theories about what infants can and should learn.” (Bateson, p. 36) The approach to teach her students about different cultures was vital to the successfulness. Just as one would expect, her students first reacted with immediate approval/disapproval statements and judged the child and mother separately. But the purpose was to compare the interactions between the mother and the child together. “It was only when they were offered a contrast, a moment of strangeness followed by the discomfort of having me point out their contradictory pattern of approval and disapproval, that they could begin to see that there was something to be discussed beyond a simple matter of nature.” (Bateson, p. 37) Likewise, it is only when we are offered a contrast through experiences that we can draw conclusions on our own learning. This can only happen through experiencing life itself and making connections through these experiences. This approach will have the same success factor if a researcher took the opportunity to connect the educational expectations among different cultures, for example the American Educational System, and the Chinese Educational System, to determine the differences among them in order to provide reasoning for both.

However, the costs are much greater for these levels of research. The accessibility for the majority becomes compromised since only a small population of researchers would have the opportunity to conduct the great amount of research required to compare and contrast two different cultures. With time and financial constraints, larger institutions are looked to in order to participate in this level of participant inquiry. “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.” (www.fhi.org, pg 14) Again, being that the research is conducted at a much deeper level, the results will prove to be useful to all involved in the education system. Nationwide policies have the potential to be affected by the results from these research studies. Therefore, while this form of participant observation pertains to a much smaller portion of the educational population, the results will apply to everyone involved.

In conclusion, no matter what kind of participant observation is conducted, and to what degree, it is absolutely vital to the success of making sense of the world, and culture we live in. Simply “experiencing” life is not enough, rather the reflections we make and the connections we make throughout our entire life lead to true insight. Time must not be a limitation to gaining insight since most of the connections are made between events that happen weeks, months and possibly even years from each other. For example, the way our family stressed religion and education in early stages of life will enable us to make better connections between how the Maori tribe uses education in their culture. Although participant observation has the potential to be very costly, the benefits of the results are absolutely priceless in comparison to the insight that can be obtained.