

Passive Participation

The ethnographer engaged in passive participation is present at the scene of action but does not participate or interact with other people to any great extent. About all you need to do is find an "observation post" from which to observe and record what goes on. If the passive participant occupies any role in the social situation, it will only be that of "bystander," "spectator," or "loiterer."

Participant observation in public places often begins with this kind of detachment. I spent many hours as a spectator in the Seattle Criminal Court observing drunks, court clerks, other spectators, and the judge. To begin with no one knew my identity or what I was doing. Later, I became more active and interviewed the judge, talked with clerks, and developed close relationships with many of the men who appeared in court on drunk charges (Spradley 1970).

One can infer a great deal about the cultural rules people follow from the vantage point of a passive participant. If you stood outside the window of a hospital nursery and watched the nurses and infants, you would notice patterns of cultural behavior—ways to hold infants, how long to allow crying, and patterns for changing and feeding them.

In this setting you might be required to remain outside the nursery window, but in many situations one can soon move from passive participant to more involvement.

Consider another example of passive participation. In her study of formal ballet classes, Hall (1976) received permission to make observations in six ballet studios. She had taken lessons herself for sixteen years at an earlier period of her life but decided to observe for ethnographic purposes. She visited two advanced classes in each of the studios for three weeks, then settled on observing three classes at one studio for two months. She did not enter into the class activities but stayed on the sidelines observing and taking notes. From her earlier experience as an ordinary participant, she moved on to observe in this passive manner. Later she interviewed ten members of an advanced class to supplement her observations.