

Active Participation

The active participant seeks to *do* what other people are doing, not merely to gain acceptance, but to more fully learn the cultural rules for behavior. Active participation begins with observations, but as knowledge of what others do grows, the ethnographer tries to learn the same behavior. Richard Nelson sought to be an active participant during his research among the Eskimo. He writes:

The primary method of data collection throughout this study is based on observation, but observation of a special nature. This is not "participant observation" in the sense that most anthropologists have used the term. It involves much more than living in a community and participating in its daily life only to the extent that one is always there to watch what is going on. This kind of observation without actually becoming involved as a part of the activity or interaction might be termed passive participation.

The present study utilizes a technique which I prefer to call "active" or "full" participation. This means that in order to document techniques of hunting and travel,

the ethnographer attempts to learn and master them himself—to participate in them to the fullest possible extent.

When full participation is used to document a technique such as a method of hunting, the ethnographer must learn to do it himself with at least the minimum proficiency necessary for success. In a sense, then, he observes others and learns from them, but he learns by observing himself as well. (1969:394).

Although active participation is an extremely useful technique, not all social situations offer the same opportunity as does Eskimo seal hunting. The ethnographer studying open heart surgery in a hospital or the dancing of professional ballerinas may have difficulty carrying out the same activities as those done by the surgeon or the dancer. Most ethnographers can find some areas in their research where active participation is feasible and even limited use of this technique will contribute to greater understanding.