



Conducting Participant Observations on Youth Subcultures

Participant observation is a qualitative research method where the researcher immerses themselves in the daily lives of a group to better understand their culture and behaviors. When studying youth subcultures, this involves spending time with young people who share specific interests, styles, or attitudes, like gamers, skaters, or goths.

Steps to Conduct Participant Observation:

- 1. Identify the Subculture:** Choose a youth subculture that interests you and is accessible. For example, punk, rave culture, or climate activist groups.
- 2. Gain Access:** Build rapport with members of the subculture. This might involve attending events, hanging out in relevant spaces, or being introduced by a gatekeeper (a trusted group member).
- 3. Decide Your Role:** You can be an *overt observer* (where participants know you're a researcher) or a *covert observer* (where they do not). Each approach has its pros and cons.
- 4. Record Observations:** Use a notebook or a digital device to document what you see, hear, and experience. Focus on:
 - Group behaviors.
 - Language or slang.
 - Clothing, music, or other cultural markers.
 - Interactions with outsiders. For example, if studying skaters, observe their routines at skateparks, group dynamics, and how they interact with other park users.
- 5. Analyse and Interpret:** After gathering data, identify patterns or themes. How does this subculture express identity, resist mainstream culture, or interact with other groups?

Issues in Participant Observation:

Access and Trust: Some subcultures are suspicious of outsiders, especially adults or authority figures. How would you build trust in a covert or overt role?

Ethical Concerns:

Covert research raises issues of informed consent.

Overt research may alter group behavior (Hawthorne Effect).

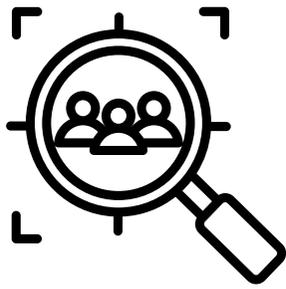
How could you balance ethical concerns with the need for authentic data?

Bias: As an observer, you might subconsciously interpret behaviors based on stereotypes. How could you remain objective?

Danger or Discomfort: Some subcultures might engage in risky or illegal behaviors. How would you protect your safety while observing?

Recording Challenges: It might be hard to take notes without drawing attention. How could you discreetly record your findings?





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Examples of Research into Youth Subcultures and Challenges Faced

Howard Becker (1963) - Outsiders

Becker's study of marijuana users explored how subcultures label behaviors as deviant and create shared norms around deviance. His participant observation faced several challenges:

- **Trust and Access:** Gaining the trust of individuals engaged in illegal behavior was difficult. Becker had to ensure they saw him as a non-threatening observer, which required time and careful relationship-building.
- **Ethical Concerns:** Observing drug use raised ethical dilemmas. He had to decide how much to disclose about his role and ensure participants weren't put at greater risk by his presence.
- **Bias:** The illegal nature of the activities may have influenced how Becker interpreted group behavior, risking a biased view of the participants.

If you were Becker, how would you balance gaining access to sensitive groups with maintaining ethical standards?

Paul Willis (1977) - Learning to Labour

Willis observed working-class boys ("lads") in a school setting to understand how their subculture resisted school authority and reproduced class inequalities.

- **Ethical Concerns:** As a researcher, Willis observed potentially harmful behaviors, such as bullying and the normalization of sexism in the lads' interactions. He had to decide how much to intervene or report.
- **Hawthorne Effect:** Some boys may have changed their behavior knowing Willis was observing them, raising questions about the authenticity of the data.
- **Power Imbalance:** Willis was an adult researching teenage boys. This could have influenced how much the participants trusted him and what they chose to reveal.

What strategies could Willis have used to reduce the impact of the Hawthorne Effect while still conducting overt observation?

Sarah Thornton (1995) - Club Cultures

Thornton researched youth involved in rave and club scenes, focusing on how they used music and style to create social status.

- **Access and Safety:** Thornton had to immerse herself in club culture, which sometimes involved attending venues where drug use was prevalent. This posed challenges for personal safety and ethical boundaries.
- **Recording Data:** Clubs were noisy, fast-paced environments, making it difficult to discreetly document interactions or conversations.
- **Cultural Insider/Outsider Status:** Thornton was older and not a direct member of the rave subculture, which could have affected how participants behaved around her or how she interpreted their actions.

How might Thornton's outsider status have influenced her observations? How could she ensure her interpretation of rave culture was accurate and not shaped by her biases?

