

**Research Methods (HDFS 3390),
Alan Reifman, Texas Tech University
Observational Research**

Measuring people's behaviors and emotions by watching them.

Not relying on people to self-report.

“The observations are made without disturbing, influencing or altering the environment or the participants in any way.” ([link](#))

**Either use some kind of quantitative scoring system
or write qualitative accounts.**

| | In the natural “habitat” of those being observed? | Participants aware they are being observed? | Researcher discloses true identity & purpose to those being observed? | Examples (from Dr. Reifman) |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| Naturalistic Observation (“researcher typically attempts to carry out the observations without the knowledge of the participants”) | YES | NO | NO | Preschool drop-off study |
| Participant/Observer (“researcher will insert himself/herself... as a member of the group”) <i>Covert</i> | YES | NO | NO | Pledged |
| Participant/Observer <i>Overt</i> | YES | YES | YES | Gang Leader for a Day; On the Run |
| Controlled Laboratory Observation | NO (but researcher tries to simulate) | YES | YES | Marital interaction in problem-drinking vs. control couples |

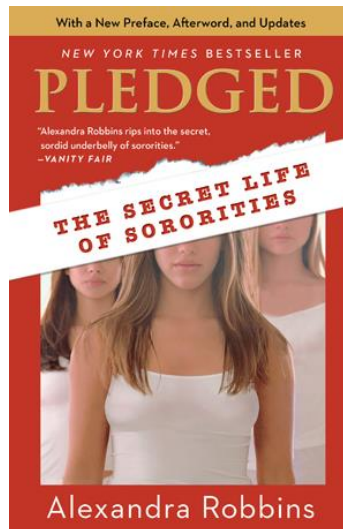
Based on: https://cirt.gcu.edu/research/developmentresources/research_ready/descriptive/observational

Another term you may encounter is **ethnography**, which is very similar to participant observation (see in this [document](#) the paragraph beginning “The following is a useful...”). For further information on ethnography, see [here](#).

Pledged, by Alexandra Robbins

EXCERPT ON AUTHOR'S METHODOLOGY:

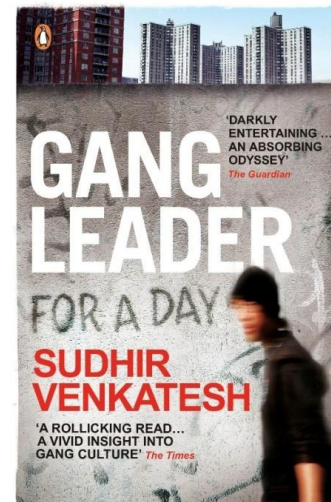
*Because no sorority would knowingly let me tail its sisters for the year, it became necessary for me to fly **under the radar** of both the national offices and the sorority girls themselves. I sought out individual sisters who were willing to risk their sorority membership by letting me into their lives... knowing that they could not tell anyone – their sorority sisters, their friends, their families – who I really was. I can't divulge how the four girls I chose... introduced me to their sisters, who **did not know**; and I can't disclose the **disguise** I wore or role I played when spending time with these groups (suffice it to say, **I can pass for nineteen**). To further protect the four girls... I have given **pseudonyms** to them, their school, and their school's Greek groups...*



Gang Leader for a Day, by Sudhir Venkatesh

KEY POINTS ON AUTHOR'S METHODOLOGY:

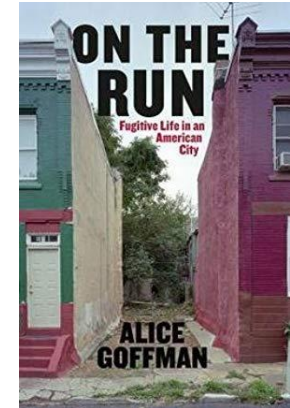
- Was planning to do research on poverty and race, went to housing project near university, and stumbled upon gang members.
- Repeatedly told the gang members he was from University of Chicago, when first encountering them.
- “JT,” the gang’s leader, took Venkatesh under his wing to some extent. JT showed an interest in the research, asking: “Why do researchers use multiple-choice surveys like the one [Venkatesh] was using [at first]? Why don’t they just talk with people?”
- JT also laid out the ground rules for Venkatesh to remain in good standing with the gang: “What you should be asking yourself is this: ‘Am I going to be on the side of black folks or the cops?’ ... Either you’re with us – you feel like you’re in this with us and you respect that – or you’re just here to look around.”
- Venkatesh was misleading JT in one way, however, giving him the impression the observations would lead to a book on JT’s life, rather than the social system of gangs and public housing, more generally.
- Venkatesh eventually consulted a lawyer to see if the things Venkatesh was witnessing and hearing during his observations could get him in trouble with the law.
 - One thing he found out was that, “I could no longer watch the gang plan a drive-by shooting, although I could speak with them about drive-bys in the abstract.”
 - Further, “I would need to tell [JT], and perhaps a few others, about the fact that I was legally obligated to share my notes if I was ever subpoenaed.”
- [Open Letter](#) to Sudhir Venkatesh, raising thorny issues.



On the Run, by Alice Goffman

KEY POINTS ON AUTHOR'S METHODOLOGY (from APPENDIX):

- Was interested in field/observational research going back at least to her first year of undergraduate college (daughter of a famous sociologist). Took jobs to be able to do her participant observations (e.g., cafeteria at Penn to observe interactions of students and staff, who were largely from different social classes).
- Through this job and people she met, Goffman ended up hanging out with the people she studied. In fact, they all ended up sharing an apartment.
- Gave a lot of thought to differences between her (“a white woman who comes from an educated and well-off family”) and those she observed (“Black young men dipping and dodging the police in a lower-income Black neighborhood in Philadelphia”).
- “Beyond being a fly on the wall, I wanted to be a participant observer. I wanted to live and work alongside Mike and his friends and neighbors so that I could understand their everyday worries and small triumphs from the inside.”
- “...participant observation involves cutting yourself off from your prior life and subjecting yourself as much as possible to the crap that people you want to know about are being subjected to.”
- For authenticity and immersion in the experience, presumably, Goffman wondered “Should I try to get arrested on purpose?” and thought that “I’d surely learn a lot by selling crack alongside Chuck and Mike and Steve...” She feared arrest “for harboring fugitives, or interfering with an arrest, or holding drugs in the apartment.”
- Worried that her presence would change situations compared to how they would have been without her, she tried to keep a low profile (“I’d sit behind a bigger person” and “learned to become a quiet person”).
- The guys knew about Goffman’s writing and she agreed to conceal their real names and neighborhood. Because they all lived together, the men “could read over my shoulder.” They offered comments and corrections, and sometimes requested she not use certain material in her papers/book (which she agreed to omit).
- Article on [controversies surrounding On the Run](#).



Controlled Laboratory Observation

Typically, couples or families are brought into a laboratory and take part in some kind of standard discussion or task (e.g., plan a vacation, discuss conflict areas). These sessions are video- or audiotaped for later scoring by raters.



Examples of lab set-ups: [Hamilton College](#); [University of Pittsburgh](#); [University of California, Santa Cruz](#); [Gottman “Love Lab”](#) (Seattle); [University of Portsmouth](#) (United Kingdom), [Bar Lab for Alcohol Research](#) (University of Washington)

Laboratory Observation (Continued)

- **Differences from self-report:**
 - Observation assesses **actual behaviors and emotions**, whereas self-report allows only recollections or descriptions of them. As [one writer](#) puts it, *"Instead of just asking people how they argued or resolved disputes, researchers could see and hear them in action."*
 - Observation better captures **group or dyadic dynamics** than self-report.
 - Observational data can be obtained from people of any age (e.g., infants), whereas self-report requires certain level of verbal ability
- **Similar to self-report in some ways:**
 - Need to establish reliability (inter-rater) and validity (e.g., correlation between couples' relationship quality during observed tasks **and what?**) . See Gottman et al. (2001), Table 3.
 - Potential for subjects to distort how they truly feel.
- **Suggestions for getting participants to act naturally and authentically (Copeland & White, 1991)**
 - "... pick a topic or task that will be interesting to the family..." as the more absorbed participants are in the task, the more likely they will "forget that they are being observed."
 - "...provide an honest and believable rationale" for study, so task will be taken more seriously.
 - Make setting as natural as possible, keeping cameras hidden (although participants are told they are being filmed) and setting up lab to look like living room (or other familiar place).

Examples of Controlled Observational Studies

- Mother-Toddler Communication Study ([video](#), [explanation of methods](#), see “Caregiver-Child Interaction”)
- Minnett, A. M., Vandell, D. L., & Santrock, J. W. (1983). The effects of sibling status on sibling interaction: Influence of birth order, age, spacing, sex of child, and sex of sibling. *Child Development*, 54, 1064-1072. (available via TTU Library website)

Further Resources on Observational Research

- Penn State [syllabus](#) containing an extensive reading list on observational research
- *New York Times* [article](#) (May 2010) on \$9 million study that filmed families in their homes for entire weeks, producing over 1,500 hours of videotape (conducted by UCLA [Center on Everyday Lives of Families](#))

Content Analysis

Similar to Observational Research, But Judges' Ratings Done on Written Materials or Other Artifacts, Not on Live Human Behavior

Sources:

- Websites/Social Media
- Books
- Newspapers/Magazines
- Papers of Famous People (e.g., Presidents, Supreme Court Justices)
- Television Shows or Movies

Examples of Research Studies

- How newspaper comics' depictions of fathers changed between 1940-1999 (slideshow exemplifying cartoons about fathers, though not necessarily ones used in the study).
- Idea that Olympic bronze medalists (3rd place) may be happier than silver medalists (2nd place), even though they finished lower (bronze happy to win any medal, silver thinks about how could have won gold).