

Participant Observation

Engagement range	Inform/Consult
Difficulty level	Medium to Hard
Cost	Medium (\$1,000 to \$10,000) High (over \$10,000)
When might you use it	To communicate an issue To discover community issues To develop community capacity To showcase product, plan, policy To develop action plan
Number of people required to help to organise	One-three people
Time to organise	Medium (six weeks to six months) Long (over six months)
Size of audience	Large (over 30)
Issues/resources to think about	Staff; Publicity; Accommodation; Observation locations (may include a location for a storefront drop-in centre); Record-keeping facilities (computers, notebooks); Venues and resources for public meetings (see Workshops)
Innovation level	Low

Description

Participant observation is a method of collecting information about the operation of, and attitudes existing in, a community through a researcher living in the area for an extended period.

The participant observer becomes known within the community, and gets to know the community in a more intimate and detailed way than someone who simply comes to do a survey and then departs.

The participant observer consequently is given much more detailed information, and may identify specific issues and assist groups to address these by developing mutually agreed principles and practices.

Objective

- To collect more detailed information about a community's habits, opinions and issues and with a view to developing planning and policies that better incorporate the community's needs and wishes.

Desired Outcome

- One way of ensuring that planning and decision making incorporates community needs and opinions, and will therefore be more acceptable and more useful to the community.

Uses/Strengths

- Can develop greater understanding of sensitive situations.
- Can be used before developing a consultation program in cases where the nature of community issues is not known to agencies.
- Can be used for scoping information and determining key players when the issue is contentious or controversial.
- Can assist in the development of a more thoughtful consultation program because participant observation is usually conducted incognito.
- Can allow the development of consultation processes that suit the subject community.

Special Considerations/Weaknesses

- This method is limited, and needs to be used in conjunction with other methods for collecting information (e.g. surveys, public meetings, and/or displays and exhibits).
- Depends on the ability of the researcher/consultant to correctly observe and draw appropriate conclusions.
- Can create concern in the community.
- Not recommended for use in isolation but in conjunction with other tools and techniques, to offset any bias or inaccuracy in the observer's conclusions.
- Applicable to a wide variety of issues.
- Particularly useful as a technique where the issue is contentious or controversial.
- Takes a long time.

Method

1. Researcher lives in or regularly visits the site/suburb/organisation.
2. Observations are made by the researcher regarding opinions or reactions to particular issues.
3. Researchers should state their intentions openly, and integrate themselves into the community.
4. The conclusions drawn by the researcher depend largely on the researcher's abilities, and should be seen within this context.
5. Generally, participant observation should be combined with actual participation techniques to be of any value.