

**CLOAK-AND-DAGGER ORGANIZATION RESEARCH:
BENEFITS, COSTS & ETHICS OF COVERT PARTICIPANT
OBSERVATION**

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ABSTRACT

Covert participant observation has often been discarded as a research method in the social sciences on the grounds that deceiving research subjects is unethical. This article reviews the benefits and costs of the method to argue that the ethicality of covert observation is more ambiguous. It posits that all observational studies sit along a continuum of consent, with few research projects being either fully overt or fully covert. Furthermore, this article demonstrates that the study of socially important topics such as deviance, misconduct or the treatment of minorities is often only possible through substantially covert participant observation.

INTRODUCTION

Some forms of fieldwork and participant observation can be ethically ambiguous but might be justified by the value of the knowledge they generate. Covert observation is a qualitative method that describes a researcher observing and sometimes participating in organizational life without revealing the nature or even the existence of their research (Vinten, 1994). Scholars across the social sciences have employed various forms of covert observation (e.g. in sociology, with the notorious study of Goffman, 1961). Although fairly infrequent, organizational scholars have also utilized covert observations (e.g., Morales and Lambert, 2012; Postula & Postula, 2011; Bernstein, 2012). Proponents of this method have articulated its value in providing insights into otherwise inaccessible organizations and institutions (Sullivan, 1959), defending it on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis (Lauder, 2003; Oeye, Bjelland & Skorpen, 2007; Oliver & Eales, 2008).

This approach was initially justified by the will to access previously unavailable data and to interpret it in a meaningful way, by someone that could become acquainted with the organizational context (Sullivan, et al. 1958; Bulmer, 1982). This familiarity with the field provides the researcher with a more fine-grained understanding of the issues faced by the organization (Oliver & Eales, 2008). Lauder (2003) for example, had to engage in covert observation after overt observation had yielded very little insights on what was actually happening in a controversial right-

wing movement. Subjects are also “free from disturbance and inhibition” (Homan, 1980: 3), and covert observation is one way to ensure that the behavior of subjects is more natural and less affected by the presence of the researcher. It is thus recognized that the knowledge obtained from covert observation would often not have been available otherwise (Bulmer, 1982).

THE DEBATE AROUND COVERT PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Participant observation is a qualitative method, which studies “phenomena in the environments in which they naturally occur and [using] social actors' meanings to understand the phenomena” (Gephart, 2004: 455) and is particularly adapted for phenomenological approaches (Gill, 2014; Gill, 2015). Participant observation often requires a researcher to be embedded in the field and to interact with organizational members (Gephart, 2004). In covert participant observation, “the researcher conceals true identity and purports to play some other role” and their “true identity [...] remains a secret to those being observed, as does the nature and even the existence of the research” (Vinten, 1994: 33). Covert participant observation therefore usually generates informal data and research notes rather than concrete quotes (Vinten, 1994).

The covert observer acknowledges and values the reflexivity of their subjects, but does not necessarily let subjects know about their role as producers of knowledge. Sullivan (1959), for example, explained how some of the subjects collaborated with the researcher on the analysis of the data and on his preparation, some of them only being aware of the research purpose. In this sense, covert participant observation can be the starting point of an abductive research process that help builds baseline and intuitive hypotheses from the observation. It can be further refined through the collection of additional empirical elements, potentially using different methods (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

The benefits of covert participant observation

First, covert participant observation can provide access to organizations and institutions that would otherwise be unwilling to accept a researcher or certain research projects. For instance, organizations that have something to hide (e.g. Morales & Lambert, 2012) or wanting to remain mysterious to preserve internal values and cohesion (e.g. Festinger, et al. 2008). More broadly, fields or stigmatized can also be resistant to outsiders (Clemente & Roulet, 2015; Roulet, 2015).

Second, it can help to bypass gatekeepers thereby giving more autonomy and independence to the researcher. In most situations, gaining access to a field of research would involve a project being endorsed by an intermediary (Burgess, 1984). This intermediary can potentially circumscribe the scope of the research, thereby limiting opportunities to unveil elements that could be detrimental to the field or the organization. As a consequence, a gatekeeper in overt observations may be able to direct the observer’s attention and thus bias the data obtained.

Third, it may prevent a researcher being perceived as an outsider by those being observed, who may modify their behaviors when aware of being observed. Being undercover can sometimes be necessary to assume a “total participating role” (Sullivan, 1959: 399). The advocates of covert participant observation have pointed out the richness of the data obtained and the fact that it gives the researcher a more profound understanding of the organizational issues at stake (Oliver & Eales, 2008) and defended the argument that undercover researchers were less disruptive to the field of investigation than overt observants (Lauder, 2003).

The criticisms of covert observation

The relatively small number of research studies that explicitly state employing covert observations is likely to reflect the ethical scrutiny that the method has attracted. Covert observation is “interactionally deceitful” (Ditton, 1977: 10). The deception typically relates to the identity of the researcher or the intent of the research (Lauder, 2003).

Undercover participant observation, as a specific form of participant observation, has thus been criticized for five, mostly ethical, reasons. First, deceiving subjects by observing them without their consent, and thereby betraying their trust, is often viewed as a breach of ethics. Second, it can be seen as a way for organizations or the persons in charge to spy on lower level employees (Coser, 1959). Third, the covert observer may have to engage in condemnable behaviors to be accepted as a member of the observed community (Dewalt, et al. 1998). Fourth, the validity of data collected through covert observation is often unverifiable and lacks validity. Fifth, there is a lack of guidance for researchers seeking to employ covert studies.

RE-CONSIDERING THE ETHICALITY OF COVERT PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Declaring covert observations as unethical due to their failure to acquire consent simplifies a complex issue. Taking inspiration from Leo (1995), who argued that establishing trust in fieldwork cannot be reified as an all-or-nothing event, this article suggests that all observational studies are situated along a continuum of participant consent. Observational studies are rarely fully covert or fully overt but usually situated somewhere between these two poles.

Covert observation is only “different in degree in the extent of deception used from “open” research” (Bulmer, 1982: 253). In the middle of the continuum, the observation can be only partly covert with a share of the subjects knowing about the real identity of the researcher. For example, the senior members or gatekeepers of the organizations can potentially be informed of the actual mission of the participant observers. This might be actually required for research access and can be an opportunity for the researcher to reassure subjects on the fact that findings will be anonymous. Bulmer (1982) distinguishes other fine-grained approach such as the “native-as-stranger” (the researcher goes back to a field he or she has been naturally acclimated to in the past), the “covert outsider” (taking a role different than the observed subjects) or “overt insider” (in which the organization accepts and knows the researcher’s purpose, by contrast with the majority of the subjects).

Oeye et al. (2007) suggest that engaging in covert participant observation implies a risk/benefit calculation: the researchers must limit the harm to the subjects by relying on anonymity and be ready to feedback the observed organizations and institutions to improve and fix the issues identified. Moreover, scholars engaging in covert observation must be able to “justify the value” of the knowledge acquired, and show that “nondeceptive alternative procedures are not feasible” (American Psychological Association, 2010: 8.07). Oliver & Eales (2008) for example, justify extensively the use of covert observation and list the reasons why this approach was deemed appropriate in each case of covert observation.

CONCLUSION

The use of covert participant observation has been the topic of numerous debates in the social sciences. Often judged as unethical (Coser, 1959; Roth, 1959; Erikson, 1995; 1996), covert participant observation has become increasingly rare in organizational research. In the meantime, covert participant observations have yielded crucial knowledge in some fields such as psychology (Festinger, et al. 2008) and medicine (Oeyes, et al 2007).

Observational studies are rarely fully covert or fully overt but, instead, usually situated somewhere between these two poles. Thus, overly simplistic categorizations of covert observation as unethical preclude a potentially valuable research method. The ethicality of resorting to covert observation is context dependent (Oliver & Eales, 2008). A number of scholars have called for a consequentialist approach that weights the costs and benefits of such methods (Johnston, 1992; Lauder, 2003; Oliver & Eales, 2008) depending on the research objective

Despite ethical concerns, covert observation can enable researchers to gain access to communities or organizations and to collect knowledge that would not have been available through other methods. In some situations, covert participant observation can help create knowledge to change society for the best (Lauder, 2003). Covert observations can help researchers design other steps of data collection (Bernstein, 2012) or open entirely new fields of inquiry for social scientists (Goffman, 1961). These and other benefits of covert participant observation are available to researchers who carefully justify their use of the method, consider post-observation processes and ensure the protection of their participants.

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