

the boundaries between researcher and research subject and their roles in the process of data collection and analysis. The logical culmination of this position might be the methodology of autoethnography, which fully and completely merges the roles of researcher and researched in a single person. If the concept of validity is in some way related to the search for truth, then the nonessentialist researcher will regard it as a spurious notion since truth is at best elusive and at worst, illusory.

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*See also* Authority; Bias; Bracketing; Collaborative Research; Constructivism; Deconstruction; Empowerment; Essentialism; Existentialism; Hermeneutics; Interpretive Phenomenology; Literature in Qualitative Research; Narrative Texts; Poststructuralism; Subjectivity

### Further Readings

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## NONPARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

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Nonparticipation observation is a relatively unobtrusive qualitative research strategy for gathering primary data about some aspect of the social world without interacting directly with its participants. Nonparticipant observers sometimes are physically copresent with research participants in a naturalistic setting, but other times may not be present in the setting.

Researchers may engage in nonparticipant observation for a number of reasons. First, the researcher may have limited or no access to a particular group and therefore may not have the opportunity to engage in participant observation. For example, a researcher might be interested in studying the social behaviors of

professional athletes on the field or how parents control their children in public settings, yet is neither an athlete nor a parent. In both cases, nonparticipant observers could take a position within the setting and record what they observe without interacting directly with participants.

Second, the research setting might be one in which participant observation would be dangerous or difficult. Doing research on riots or mobs, for example, is difficult because of their spontaneous nature. Researching collective action (e.g., demonstrations, protests) directly may be undesirable. In these settings, researchers may rely on video recorded by news agencies or insiders to observe social behavior. Film and video use also allows for the observation of historical social phenomena.

Third, the researcher may be interested less in the subjectively experienced dimensions of social action and more in reified patterns that emerge from such action. For example, one may derive insight from observing how people utilize public space, such as a national park, an internet café, a mall, or a classroom, without interacting with users. The question of researcher reactivity arises here, that is, questioning the extent to which nonparticipant observation potentially affects the setting.

Nonparticipant observation may be overt or covert, occurring in public or private settings. Unique ethical issues will arise with each combination: the covert observer in a public setting must deal with a different set of ethical considerations than an overt observer in a public setting, and so on. Each combination will also affect how the observer might collect data. Typical strategies include writing fieldnotes or audio- or videorecording social action. Recording behavior overtly might be interpreted by participants as exceptional or intrusive, thus potentially affecting their behavior, while covert observation may break ethics norms.

Digital media such as the internet provide opportunities for new forms of nonparticipant observation. Researchers may have an interest in the interactions among members of an internet community to which they do not belong. Given the open access and anonymity associated with many digital spaces, nonparticipant observers could register with a digital community and “lurk,” reading all the messages posted by community members without ever posting themselves. Researchers may browse web pages, create avatars in digital worlds, or subscribe to email lists—each providing an opportunity for observation with minimal

impact on the setting. Data from digital media are often more easily recorded because the researcher can use screenshots, copy-and-paste functions, and save messages and logs.

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*See also* Covert Observation; Naturalistic Observation; Observational Research; Observer Bias; Participant Observation

### Further Readings

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## NONPROBABILITY SAMPLING

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Nonprobability sampling is a common technique in qualitative research where researchers use their judgment to select a sample. Unlike probability sampling, where each participant has the same chance of being selected, participants selected using the nonprobability sampling technique are chosen because they meet preestablished criteria.

Some of the more common types of nonprobability sampling techniques are convenience sampling, snowball sampling, and purposive sampling. In convenience sampling, participants are selected because they are accessible and therefore relatively easy for the researcher to recruit. With snowball sampling, new participants to the study are recruited when current participants refer other, potential participants to the researcher (e.g., as they are members of the same group or share similar interests that are relevant to the project at hand). Purposive sampling refers to a process where participants are selected because they meet criteria that have been predetermined by the researcher as relevant to addressing the research question (e.g., people of a particular age or other demographic category). These three techniques each highlight that nonprobability sampling requires the researcher to make the final decision in terms of who does and does not participate in the study. Often, these

techniques are used together to recruit individuals to participate in the study.

This sampling approach, which provides researchers with the capacity to construct their own sample, is considered quite useful in certain circumstances. For instance, there may be certain situations in which nonprobability sampling is the only way to access individuals from certain subcultures. That is, if one were trying to study members of a closed-membership organization (such as organized crime), one might realistically need to recruit participants using a snowball sampling technique, starting with one key informant. Furthermore, nonprobability sampling can also be quite appropriate when researchers are interested in studying the traits of a specific group and are not necessarily concerned with extending the results to the broader population. This need is quite applicable to qualitative research, where the researcher wants to study a particular group in some depth and as a result, may try to select people individually who represent typical traits from within that group. Nonprobability sampling might also be considered quite appropriate for pilot studies, where the researcher is trying to determine whether a problem is viable on a larger scale. In this instance, the researcher may choose to use a convenience sample because the data are less expensive and less time-intensive to collect.

Despite its utility, nonprobability sampling does raise some concerns. First, it may limit the researcher's capacity to point to the transferability of data. That is, for researchers who do wish to extend the interpretation of their findings to other groups, it may be particularly difficult to do so. For example, if one studies the attitudes of only single mothers toward daycare facilities, it would be difficult to transfer these findings to mothers with partners, as their situations and needs are likely quite different. Another common concern relates to bias and the possibility that the researcher may have shown bias in selecting study participants by using these techniques. Issues of bias and transferability must be considered and addressed at the data collection, analysis, and writing stages of the research process. In spite of these concerns, nonprobability sampling provides an appropriate means by which qualitative researchers can study specific groups, recruit elusive populations, and conduct exploratory research.

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*See also* Convenience Sample; Purposive Sampling; Sampling; Snowball Sampling