

# Book Review - Participant Observation (James Spradley)

*Participant Observation* by James Spradley provides a comprehensive and worthwhile look at how to observation people and things in an ethnographic study. Defining ethnography as “describing a culture”, he noted the need to “grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world.” Spradley distinguished explicit culture, the kinds of things that members of a culture consciously realize about themselves, versus tacit culture, cultural truths outside consciousness. He compared the linear social science research process with more cyclical ethnographic research. Task one is to identify a social situation to study and task two is to make descriptive observations about that situation. Making a reliable record using actual quotes and concrete words about events rather than interpretations of those events, is vital. Spradley’s Descriptive Question Matrix will help researchers be exhaustive in their questions.

Task three in participant observation is domain analysis, reviewing all of the descriptive observations and determining relationships between them. Once the investigator understands his data thus far, he will do focused observations to answer questions that arose from the descriptive observations. These observations will elucidate the culture enough for the researcher to perform a taxonomic analysis, separating cultural factors into larger and smaller groups and ranking them. The last level, selective observations, follows, with the goal of looking for differences between cultural categories. Finally with data collection complete, the researcher will analyze each component of the culture, identify key themes, and take a cultural inventory. Ultimately this will result in a cultural inventory.

Field workers in Christian missions must understand the people with whom they work.

The two primary means to get original data on a culture are to interview participants and to observe participants. Spradley's *Participant Observation* provides an exhaustive study of how to do the latter. It systematically helps its readers learn how to observe, and serves as a compact field reference for those doing so.