

Barbara Ehrenreich conducted her research using participant observation. This is a method of sociological research in which the researcher immerses him or herself in a group in order to study its members and their culture and behaviors. It has many parallels to the cultural field of anthropology, allowing a candid look at the practices of the group being studied. This type of research results in qualitative information.

The participant observation method can be conducted in the open, with group members being informed of the researcher's presence and purpose. Open research can have its drawbacks, however; group members may be less likely to share openly and may alter their behavior if aware they are being studied (Strayer et. al, 2017). A great example of this is the work done by journalist David Simon, who has conducted research about the relationship between poverty and crime in Baltimore (Simon and Burns, 1998). Simon spent a year interviewing and observing residents of a decaying, crime-ridden neighborhood, all of whom were explicitly informed as to who he was and why he was there.

In contrast, it can also be carried out undercover, which is exactly what Ehrenreich chose for her research. For one year, she lived as a minimum wage employee. She worked various service industry jobs and attempted to live and pay bills on this salary. In her resulting book, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, Ehrenreich came to the conclusion that this was not, in fact, possible. She supports this finding not only with her personal experience, but the challenges faced by her co-workers at the various jobs she worked as well.

While this certainly afforded her a more in-depth, and perhaps more honest look at the people and circumstances she was researching, it required a great deal of commitment and sacrifice. Ehrenreich was essentially acting for the duration of the project: playing the role of a low-income worker. She performed the same physical labor as her peers, struggled to pay rent

and utilities, and gave up the comforts she was used to in her normal life as a journalist. It can also be difficult to remain impartial and avoid getting too involved with this type of research. Personally, I think it would be challenging to avoid forming bonds and even friendships while living and working in close proximity to others facing the same hardships as myself.

In conclusion, this type of research is not as quick to provide results as a survey or census, requiring time and patience in order to obtain adequate results. It also requires a substantial commitment from the researcher(s), and sometimes personal health and safety can even be at risk. However, many researchers like Ehrenreich feel the in-depth information they learn as a result of the process make that risk an acceptable one.

References

- Simon, D., & Burns, E. (1998). *The corner : a year in the life of an inner-city neighborhood*. Broadway Books.
- Strayer, E., Griffiths, H., Keirns, N., Sadler, T., Cody-Rydzewski, S., Scaramuzzo, G., Vyain, S., Brye, J., & Jones, F. (2017). *Introduction To Sociology 2E*. Open Stax.
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