

Research Methods: Examples

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover two specific research methods in sociology, through definition and discussion of:

1. Lois Benjamin and In-Depth Interviewing
2. William Foote Whyte and Participant Observation

1. LOIS BENJAMIN AND IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWING

Lois Benjamin is a contemporary sociologist interested in issues of race among successful African Americans. Benjamin wrote a book called *The Black Elite*, which is a great example of how to use interview research effectively.

Interview research is a methodology in which research subjects are asked a series of questions by the researcher. Benjamin was using a particular kind of interview research relying on semi-structured in-depth interviews. The researcher asks open-ended questions, and the interview takes more of the form of a conversation whereby the interviewer will follow up on things that the interviewee says.

By asking open-ended questions, it allows the person who is being interviewed to elaborate at length on what they feel is important to them and to articulate their meanings and their worldview in their own words, rather than in the words of the researcher.

IN CONTEXT

Benjamin conducted approximately 100 in-depth interviews. Being a black woman herself, she was interested in learning about issues of racial injustice after the Civil Rights Movement in the late 20th century. She was particularly interested in black elites and how they viewed racism in their everyday lives.

Benjamin conducted her interviews with successful African Americans and found that despite ostensible improvements in social standing since the Civil Rights Movement and the passing of time, contemporary African Americans still suffer from racial hostilities.



BIG IDEA

A strength of in-depth interviewing is that it allows the respondents to be more candid and conversational and to articulate the constraints they face.



TERM TO KNOW

Interview Research

A research methodology where subjects respond to the questions of a researcher in interviews, focus groups, or questionnaires.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Lois Benjamin

American sociologist who studied "The Black Elite" using interview research methodology.

2. WILLIAM FOOTE WHYTE AND PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

William Foote Whyte was an American sociologist known for excellent participant observation work. He helped to bring this methodology into sociology from anthropology, where it began.

Participant observation is a research method in which subjects are observed in their natural setting, going about their day-to-day routines.

IN CONTEXT

In order to immerse himself in the population which he was studying, William Foote Whyte lived for three years in an Italian community of Boston during the 1930s. He was interested in learning about the social life of street gangs.

Whyte wrote a book called *Street Corner Society* that stemmed from his three years of participant observation research within the community. Whyte called the town he studied 'Cornerville,' and in *Street Corner Society*, he argued that the prevailing stereotypes that the outside world--people outside of Cornerville--had of the residents of Cornerville were inaccurate.

The people of Cornerville were, in reality, hardworking and successful, and dreamt of sending their kids to college. In this way, he refuted stereotypes through participant observation research.

Social scientists say that participant observation is essentially a way of making the familiar strange and the strange familiar.



THINK ABOUT IT

How can you circumvent assumptions that you take for granted about a certain group of people? You can live in their community, experience and interact with these people--by becoming a member through participant observation, you are able to challenge stereotypes.



TERM TO KNOW

Participant Observation

A research methodology where subjects are observed in-context going about their daily lives.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

William Foote White

American sociologist who studied street life among Italian immigrants using participant-observation research methodology.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about two of the primary methodologies that sociologists use to gather data, **participant observation** and **in-depth interviewing**. You also learned about two sociologists who used these methods to produce groundbreaking work, **Lois Benjamin** and **William Foote Whyte**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



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