**Background Information:**

**Participant Observation** is a research method in which the scholar observes and interacts with people in their natural setting. Participant observation is a qualitative research method that requires prolonged immersion in the study subject’s setting. Participant observation is a method often used for theory exploration and development. As Fenno (1978) describes in the Appendix to “Home Style: House Members in their Districts,” there are a few important things to consider when doing participant observation research.

1. Access to research subjects.
   1. **Rapport** -- that is, the development of a close relationship in which people care about, understand and can communicate effectively with each other -- can help a researcher gain access to subjects.
      1. Increased time spent with a research subject can help build rapport.
   2. Building trust with research subjects will increase the quality and accuracy of information.
      1. Approach participant observation from a place of learning rather than judgement.
      2. Be considerate of the feelings and needs of the research subject.
2. Flexibility.
   1. As Fenno writes, “Go where you are driven; take what you are given; and, when in doubt, be quiet.”
   2. Attempt to limit preconceptions and observe with an open mind.
3. Data collection.
   1. Data in participant observation is one’s field notes.
   2. Field notes can be recorded by taking notes while an event occurs or after.
   3. The more thorough the notes the better.
   4. But may need to consider building trust and rapport first – pulling out a note pad or recorder right away may put subjects on guard and make them less willing to be upfront with you.
   5. The presence of a researcher changes the environment of the research setting, which researchers need to be mindful of.

**Applied Activity**:

In this activity, you will attempt to answer the research question ***“Why (or how) do students use the Campus Market?”***

We will go as a class to the Campus Market for about 10-15 minutes to observe how students behave. You can sit and watch, participate (go in and use the campus market), and talk to various people to try and uncover why and how students use the market at a given time of day.

Remember: in participant observation, the theorizing, data collection, and data analysis steps happen somewhat simultaneously. Even so, we want to brainstorm some possible uses of the campus market. Write down a few potential explanations below. For each explanation, what types of things would you expect to see if it were true? As you conduct your field work in a bit, you will be looking for alternate explanations as well.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Explanation | What things might we observe if explanation correct? |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |

It is important to remember that the presence of a researcher can change the environment we are studying. In the space below, brainstorm some actions you may take and some potential consequences that action may have on the research space.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Potential Action | Potential consequence on the study environment | Potential consequence on rapport |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

STOP HERE UNTIL WE ARRIVE AT THE CAMPUS MARKET

**Data, Field Notes:**

In the space below, jot down your observations while you are at the campus market. This may feel silly. But you MUST do this. Some things to potentially record…

-What were people buying, generally?

-What did people do after they purchased something?

-Was everyone buying something? If not, what where they doing?

-Where people alone or in groups?

-Did the people at the market seem to share any characteristics?

-Is anyone doing something unexpected?

STOP HERE UNTIL WE RETURN TO THE CLASSROOM

**Analysis:**

1. What is one thing you noticed that you expected?
2. What is one thing you noticed that surprised you or that you did not anticipate?
3. List one *pattern* of behavior you observed.
4. Look back at your table from page 1. Re-write the same 3 potential explanations into the first three rows of the table below. Then, describe any data from your observations that supported or refuted that claim.

Then, list at least **one new explanation** that your field notes suggest may be occurring in row 4.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Explanation | What did you observe to support or refute this explanation? |
| 1. |  |
| 2. |  |
| 3. |  |
| 4. |  |

**Write Up**

Based on your participant observation field work, why (or how) do students use the Campus Market in the [mornings/early afternoon]? Write your answer in one to two paragraphs.

**Application to your Project**.

Write down one way in which you could use participant observation to elucidate the research question in your project.