

Participant Observation in Sport Coaching Research

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Abstract

As a method, observation has its roots in a particular branch of anthropology – that of ethnology – and at its core involves the immersion of the researcher in a social setting. In turn, observation involves the ‘systematic recording’ of cultural and human behaviour, inclusive of the activities, rituals, and relationships. This makes observation well-suited to produce detailed context-specific accounts of coaching practice that move beyond overly reductionist descriptions. The use of observation as a method has evolved over time to become compatible with a range of theoretical, ontological, and epistemological positions. Although traditionally positioned as separate from the conditions and practices under study, observation is neither neutral nor culturally-free, and depends on the participation and involvement of the researcher. This chapter addresses the possibilities of observation as a method for exploring sports coaching contexts. Our aim is to provide readers with some points of entry for employing participant observation, including some paradigmatic, theoretical, and reflexive considerations.

Keywords: *Observation; participation; reflexivity; positionality; theory; fieldnotes*

77 **Introduction and overview**

78 Fieldwork¹ is central to the majority of sociological and anthropological research traditions,
79 and relies substantially on the method and practice of ‘participant observation’.
80 Methodologically, observation has its roots in a particular branch of anthropology – that of
81 ethnology – and at its core involves the immersion of the researcher in a social setting,
82 observing and documenting the relationships, networks, routines, and events that constitute a
83 particular subculture. While participant observation has a particular affinity with ethnography,
84 the method can be used in combination with a range of epistemological, theoretical, and
85 methodological traditions. This makes participant observation particularly well-suited to
86 explore the highly-charged, ritualised, joyful, and at times heart-breaking realities of sport,
87 capturing the everyday practices, language, actions, and social order of coaching subcultures.
88 This chapter addresses the possibilities of observation as a method for understanding the
89 contexts in which sport coaching unfolds. The aim is to provide readers with some points of
90 entry for employing participant observation, including some paradigmatic, theoretical, and
91 reflexive considerations.

92 Participant observation is a strategy that combines direct participation, watching,
93 listening, asking questions, collating documents, and even audio or video recordings to
94 generate knowledge and understanding about a particular culture. Participant observation not
95 only involves studying people, but also living with and learning from them. Through sustained
96 participation over time, it is possible for researchers to describe what goes on, who or what is
97 involved, the day-to-day routines and mundanities, the spaces and places where things happen,
98 and how they occur. This makes participant observation useful for studying processes,
99 relationships among people, the organisation of events over time, patterns of social relations
100 and meaning, as well as the immediate sociocultural context (O’Reilly, 2009).

Fieldwork and observation have a rich history emerging from anthropological interest in the cultural significance of games and play (Gibson and Atkinson, 2018), and participant observation is used as a primary method in ethnographic studies of sport, exercise and leisure subcultures (Atkinson, 2016; Thorpe and Olive, 2016). Some notable ethnographic examples in sport coaching include the study of youth academy football (Cushion and Jones, 2006), semi-professional football (e.g., Corsby and Jones, 2019), elite coach education (Kolić *et al.*, 2020), high-performance disability sport (Townsend and Cushion, 2021, 2022), and elite men's rowing (e.g., Purdy and Jones, 2013). Outside of the ethnographic tradition, however, the practice of observation is often not always well-defined or acknowledged.

We argue that to understand the complexities of sports coaching, in keeping with Geertz (1973), requires us to look “at what the practitioners do” (p.5). The use of observation as a method has evolved over time to become compatible with a range of theoretical, ontological, and epistemological positions – a trend noticeable in the evolution of coaching research. Early anthropological uses of observation were concerned with “telling it as it is” (Brewer, 2000, p. 39), known as *realist* ethnography. Later, textual analyses became increasingly self-conscious (see Geertz, 1968, 1973) in their recognition of the interpretive aspects of observation. The distinction for fieldworkers is to understand whether they are aiming to capture social reality ‘as it unfolds’, or to trace their subjective interpretation of that reality. For example, researchers housed within *interpretive* perspectives, in which ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of the material spaces is required, the reflexive orientation of the researcher will inevitably shape *what* is observed, the social processes and relationships inherent, as well as the subjective dilemmas, rituals, and patterns of behaviour. From this perspective, coaching researchers enter the field with a level of openness in order to deconstruct, reconstruct, represent and interpret what happens. Whereas scholars located in the *critical* paradigm will have a particular concern for “operations of power, the reproduction of inequalities, and examples of challenges to

existing power structures” (Thorpe and Olive, 2016, p. 126), and will reflexively trace how power contours their interpretations and representations of coaching.

Housed within anthropological research traditions, observational research requires *sustained* immersion within an identified research setting: whether that is navigating the male-dominated cultures of action sports as feminist researchers (e.g., Olive and Thorpe, 2011); full bodily and sensory commitment to exploring ‘post-sport’ physical cultures (e.g., Atkinson, 2010); or conducting research into violence and hooliganism in football (e.g., Giulianotti, 1995). Yet, given that the term ‘participant observation’ connects ‘observation’ and ‘participation’, further considerations for researchers to negotiate – once access is secured – are the binaries between participation-observation, insider-outsider, and objectivity-subjectivity. For those adopting participant observation, there is paradox between participating, getting close, and gaining first-hand experience with participants, while also maintaining an academic gaze and ‘professional distance’ (see Townsend and Cushion, 2021). Historically, a primary concern in fieldwork is to guard against the researcher’s presence disturbing the situation, often reflected in a fear that ‘getting too close’ would mean the researcher can no longer notice the contextual assumptions and values of the group (O’Reilly, 2009). Such an accusation has traditionally been referred to as ‘going native’². However, if participation is deemed necessary for understanding the social and relational features of a setting, then the accusation of becoming ‘too close’ is epistemologically incoherent. That is, viewing participation as potentially tainting and leading to ‘bias’ reflects positivist assumptions that objectivity and detachment are crucial markers in the generation of new knowledge.

Various scholars have classified the relationship and level of involvement researchers may have with participants when undertaking fieldwork, commonly referred to as ‘role’ and/or ‘distance’. There are four commonly cited typologies of participation ranging from complete

participant, participant-as-observer, observer-as-participant to complete observer (Gold, 1958). The *complete participant* takes an insider role, is fully part of the setting and often observes covertly, perhaps as an active member of coaching staff. The *participant-as-observer* might gain access to a setting and be part of the group being studied, for example, as a member of support staff. The *observer-as-participant* generally has minimal involvement in the setting, or might not ‘naturally’ or normally be part of the context, such as a coach developer interested in supporting coaches *in situ*. Finally, the *complete observer* plays no active part in the setting, such as a football fan interested in studying the abuse referees experience. Some of the espoused benefits of the varying roles juxtapose the ability to be a ‘fly on the wall’ observer who can unobtrusively take detailed notes of the setting and subsequent interactions (complete observer), meanwhile the complete participant may be far more privileged to interact with, ask questions, and ‘feel’ what is going on without scrutiny or objection. Further points of consideration include the access to participants, challenges regarding ethics and deception, and negotiating the assumptions of the researcher’s interpretations of the setting.

Although there are some differences in terminology (see Bryman, 2012, for example), consensus exists that the researcher can never be neutral and their choices throughout the fieldwork have significant influence on what might be studied, and what knowledge claims can be made. Rarely is participation in a social setting so clearly demarcated. Tracy (2013), for instance, urges researchers to consider their participation in any given setting as a ‘continuum of enmeshment’, often with points of overlap – what might be understood as positionality. Like with all classifications, these typologies paint a typically clean and instrumental picture of the observation, leaving unexamined the power dynamics that contour how researchers can inhabit different roles within the process. For example, in their ethnographic study of rowing coaching, Purdy and Jones (2013) discussed how the researcher was required to negotiate varying roles (i.e., from coxswain to kitchen porter) in the hope of facilitating rich exchanges and securing

immersion into the context. Consequently, the authors illustrated the complexities and tensions of immersive study by showing how normative (often gendered) cultural orders must be negotiated, while also trying to retain a sense of authentic self (see Purdy and Jones, 2013).

It could therefore be argued that all social research is a form of participation and we cannot study the social world without being part of it. For, as Keiding (2011) emphasised, there is no privileged position that a researcher can observe from without becoming at least some part of the phenomenon under observation. Doing so shifts the concern from the difference between participation and observation to a concern with *how* the observer participates; that is, their involvement, access, and relation to the participants. The overriding point calls for researchers to gain a reflexive sense of their relation to the researched, the patterns of behaviour, deviant cases, and acknowledging their relevance to the project, as opposed to clean and neat categorisations of being an ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’.

Researchers employing participant observation, and ethnography more generally, have become increasingly self-conscious, with many scholars tracing the relationships between research, fieldwork, participants, and the texts produced. Townsend and Cushion (2021) recently illustrated how reflexivity can be used to examine the associations and tensions between being both coach and researcher simultaneously within a high performance disability sport context. Reflexivity – if done well - is crucial to make explicit some of the implicit assumptions regarding the researcher’s relationship to knowledge generation, and for tracing the alignment between theoretical, paradigmatic, and methodological assumptions in the writing and representation of the social world.

Applied issues and considerations

Adding to the complexity of participant observation, as well as the theoretical considerations associated, researchers must bend and twist to accommodate the demands and situational

constraints of participant observation. Even the best laid out plans, as Becker (1998) reminds us, are subject to unforeseen contingencies of data collection. Despite the well-placed efforts of research textbooks, it would be impossible for us to lay-out a formulaic or sequential account of observational research practices. Rather, in keeping with the spirit of this chapter, three pertinent concerns that *might* scaffold participant observation will be discussed: gaining access, note-taking, and the relationship between theory and research.

Access and participation

The extent to which a researcher positions themselves inside or outside of a sport subculture remains an issue of considerable debate (see Thorpe and Olive, 2016). Sports coaching contexts provide relatively clear and demarcated settings for observational research, across participatory, developmental, or high-performance domains (Lyle and Cushion, 2017), each with varying degrees of openness to ‘outsiders’ and can, at times, foster anti-intellectual cultures. Therefore, to employ observation as a data collection procedure in coaching necessitates both entry *and* access to the site under study. This distinction is important. Given that some coaching settings are more open or exclusive than others, *entry* does not necessarily guarantee full *access* to the ‘behind-the-scenes’ machinations of the culture; being privy to changing room discussions, involvement in management staff decision-making, or the ability to move freely between people, spaces and places without question. Instead, entry into a setting can be useful to “observe (and perhaps question) practices and behaviours that may be familiar, and thus taken for granted, by an already enculturated researcher” (Thorpe and Olive, 2016, p. 130). *Entry*, therefore is distinct from *access*, in which the researcher is required to navigate varying levels of acceptance into the culture – a process shaped by the level of cultural familiarity, kudos, power, respect or insight one has in that context. Researchers therefore may be required to leverage or draw on a pre-existing level of physical ability, technical

competence, and cultural knowledge. In addition, these cultures can, at times, be highly gendered, masculine-driven, predominantly white, ableist and heteronormative (Townsend, Bennie and Russell, 2024), thus thrusting the influence of researcher subjectivity and biography into the research process. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for fieldworkers to effectively have to ‘prove their worth’ or gain acceptance in coaching settings, and may find herself or himself being ‘tested’ in order to secure their position in the field (see, for example, Townsend and Cushion, 2021).

Therefore, as with much sociological research into sport, identifying gatekeepers who might be able to facilitate entry into the setting is crucial. Gatekeepers may act as initial contacts who might endorse the researcher and become potential allies throughout the process, and even protect the researcher from additional scrutiny. This micro-political process should not be considered a ‘one-off’ event, but may need to be continually revisited. Gatekeepers are more than ‘just access’ to research sites, meaning the researcher must understand the importance of relationships, lives, and the context under study. This means access is not something achieved, but continually negotiated through the ever-evolving relationships that shape the context, the research questions, and interactions with participants. The key here is that whether observing coaching from the “inside, outside or somewhere in between, each position must be considered in terms of its specific possibilities, challenges and limitations” (Thorpe and Olive, 2016, p. 130).

Method and Writing

Once the research setting is defined and participation is negotiated, Latour (1999, p.24) asks “how do we pack the world into words?”. The process of translating and representing the research setting into written form is complex, and points to the unavoidably interpretive nature of the accounts that finally emerge – their provisional, representational, and sometimes creative

248 aspects. As such, participant observation marries method with writing through the production
249 of fieldnotes; the importance of which are captured in Loïc Wacquant's compelling and
250 sensorial ethnography of an urban boxing gym:

251 "I started an ethnographic diary without imagining for a second that I would attend the
252 gym with increasing assiduity for three and a half years, and in the process, amass some
253 twenty-three hundred pages of raw notes by religiously consigning to paper for hours
254 every evening detailed descriptions of the events, interactions, and conversations of the
255 day" (Wacquant, 2004, p. x)

256 There is no rigorous or systematic definition of what constitutes a fieldnote, nor are
257 there any common boundaries; diaries, journals, blogs, social media, emails to family, to
258 colleagues, to supervisors can all be produced by the fieldwork. Fieldnotes can be understood
259 as sets of analytical abstractions; the basic process of writing, annotating, and recording cultural
260 accounts in the field – they are intimate and often only meaningful to their writer, and as such
261 undergo (re)contextualisation, making fieldnotes (re)intelligible and open to later synthesis and
262 theoretical elaboration.

263 In practical terms, participant observation can result in a tendency to work primarily
264 with unstructured data, which can leave researchers with the task of sorting and interpreting
265 off-the-cuff conversations, descriptions of places and spaces, patterns of routine, recordings of
266 interactions, and even visual data such as video and photographs. Simply, for the participant
267 observer, everything is data, and fieldnotes are a mnemonic device. Wolfinger (2002) provided
268 two strategies that researchers might use to scrutinise their note taking; 1) the salience
269 hierarchy, which begins with writing the most noteworthy and most interesting features of
270 fieldwork; and 2) comprehensive note-taking, which advocates a more systematic organising
271 of notes. Further examples of structuring note-taking have been described by Lofland and
272 Lofland (1984), who provided a general list of concerns that the ethnographer might use to
273 structure the notes. Although these pragmatic strategies can be helpful for researchers,

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) advocated that researchers should embrace their own unique ways of collecting data, which might involve creating their own prompts and strategies, while at the same time ensuring that the notes are guided by, and in alignment with, the aim of the research. Of course, this does not preclude the more serendipitous, creative, flexible or responsive directions that fieldwork can take. The more crucial point, perhaps, lies in how the participant observer attends to the rhythms and meanings generated by the participants, and the modes of analysis used (e.g. emergent and inductive or deductive, iterative and abductive).

Finally for method and writing, if we accept that positionality is crucial in knowledge production, then there is a clear need to scrutinise the emotional, practical, *and* personal challenges of fieldwork. Situating the researcher, their emotions, feelings and struggles that emerge during fieldwork are an important aspect of observation. For, as England (1994, 85) noted, researchers “cannot conveniently tuck away the personal behind the professional, because fieldwork is personal”. In this way, writing the self into the fieldnotes becomes an important first step. Attending to questions such as, what is it *really* like to be a woman on a professional men’s coaching staff? How do you act when you observe a coach throwing a chair at a wheelchair athlete? What do you say to an athlete that is in tears over the death of their father before a match? The ability to write rich and insightful notes lies in the interplay between theory (i.e., understanding the symbolically violent as well as the liberating aspects of structure), alongside a willingness to ground our work in the ‘realities’ of sport coaching. Such interplay is addressed in the next section.

The relationship between theory and research

As Silverman (1998) warns us, merely treating theory or a set of concepts as tools to be ‘applied’ to data, or worst still, as ritual reference to add a perceived legitimacy to the tale is inadequate. Rather, we must consider the ways in which theory may be enmeshed with the

participant observer, and, importantly, what is observed and recorded. On the one hand, established theories may be used to focus our insights in a *deductive* manner to move from the general to the specific. On the other hand, given the time spent with participants learning about their worlds, specific incidents can be taken and made-sense-of in an *inductive* manner.

Although the choice between inductive and deductive reasoning is often far less binary in practice, with theory (in the broadest sense) acting as an aid to thinking that might encourage new ways of seeing phenomena; a point captured in Rob's fieldwork where I (Rob) failed to recognise the highly individualising, ableist and masculinist coaching gaze that framed the coaching environment and how I contributed to its reproduction until much later in the research project. Therefore, to have clarity on, and agency over, theory, and its relation to the project, is crucial to shaping novel contributions.

Reflections from the field

This final section provides a composite of reflections from the ethnographic fieldwork both of us have undertaken. The intention is to bring-to-life some of the critical discussion provided above, in order to move beyond 'cleaned-up' versions of methodologies and methods, in favour of illustrating the interaction between researcher, participant observation, situation, and knowledge claims.

The starting point for discussion comes from the ways that we positioned ourselves within our fieldwork, as well as the analysis that haunted our early participant observation experiences. In this regard, following the taxonomies outlined earlier, I (Charlie) would have been placed in the category of 'complete participant'; that is, I adopted a dual role of researcher and player within a semi-professional football club. Here, the researcher as complete participant makes observations from within their own life (i.e., I had an existing identity as a semi-professional footballer), rather than to participate in the lives of others for the purpose of

323 observation. Similarly, but perhaps more akin to ‘observer-as-participant’, I (Rob) was invited
324 to become part of the management staff of a national disability sport team. For both of us, our
325 participation was more or less “complete physical, social and psychological involvement
326 within the coaching culture” (Townsend and Cushion, 2021, p. 254) and so in both cases the
327 coaches and players in our research settings were accepting of the project – and by proxy, us.
328 Our ability to leverage our social, cultural and – particularly in Charlie’s case – physical capital
329 as a member of the playing squad meant access was relatively frictionless and our integration
330 into the environments swift.

331 However, challenges and dilemmas can arise despite such familiarity. For Charlie, a
332 personal conflict developed early into the fieldwork. As the first few sessions went by, I
333 (Charlie) eagerly tried to develop my ‘findings’; my ethnographic eye. I re-read my notes and
334 attempted to refine their direction and scope in relation to the research purpose, yet my
335 ethnographic eye was weak and uncritical. Leaning on the aims and objectives of the project
336 to guide my observations, I quickly became more insecure about my position. Was I really
337 going to be able to ‘capture’ the activities and culture? Am I too close? What does ‘distance’
338 even mean in terms of relationships with participants, many of whom I counted as friends?
339 How am I influencing the participants? I felt more aware of my actions as a player; of what I
340 was seeing and sensing. The feeling was not initially liberating, often resulting in a sense of
341 being ‘lost’. Lost in the fear of; was this legitimate and rigorous research? Can I even call this
342 research?

343 In pursuit of maintaining integrity, I had to be more creative with my notetaking than
344 previously anticipated. For example, whilst a note-pad was treated with scepticism, phones
345 were a more widely accepted feature of the dressing room. I could use my iPhone for note-
346 taking without raising suspicion, making notes electronically for later transcription and

development³. In a similar vein, I also became accustomed to carrying shoes to the training ground so that I could keep a Dictaphone close-by. This meant that, despite playing commitments, I could disguise a trip for water with an audio description via the Dictaphone before returning to playing. The idea was to preserve the detail of my observations so I could then develop and enrich the notes through disciplined and systematic writing later at night.

Likewise, I (Rob) quickly abandoned bringing my notebook to training sessions, as I was too busy spending time working ‘on the shop floor’ with the players and needed to minimise disruptions to the training camps. This created challenges in recalling and prioritising the description of the day – what was worth recording? What wasn’t? Furthermore, as a member of coaching staff on camp, our work was rarely over once the kit was packed away. We would regularly meet late into the evening for management briefings where my scribbling of notes and constant asking of questions soon became an accepted part of the environment, though the fact that I was a researcher was never forgotten. For example:

One of the staff had spotted me writing notes during one of the management meetings—“look he’s writing notes already”.

The assistant coach rolled his eyes: “what can you write about that?”

The head coach laughed: “his memoirs”.

(Townsend, 2018)

Furthermore, for both of us, navigating the hierarchies of player-coach relationships as researchers meant that we had to become more attuned to the rhythms of the coaching context to gain a fuller appreciation of the subculture. As part of the management team I (Rob) wore the same kit as the staff and was an eager participant in the casual ‘banter’ and sport-specific ‘shop talk’ that was central to the majority of interactions. In the training hall and on game days I worked ‘hands on’ with the players. Reflecting the natural hierarchies within coaching, initially my role was that of reinforcing and conveying messages from the senior coaches.

375 providing encouragement often, but ‘technical’ advice and input at their discretion. As time
376 progressed, the head coach actively gave me more responsibility, asking me to lead sessions,
377 direct specific practices and generally allowing me to establish authority as a trusted voice for
378 the players. As such, I would naturally spend more time with the coaches, attending ‘staff only’
379 swim sessions before breakfast on training camps, and lingering longer than usual in the bar
380 with the coaches on weekends. This differential access to the coaches meant that I had to
381 actively cultivate more time with the players, purposefully sitting amongst them at team
382 dinners, joining them for evening gym sessions in the hotel or driving them to practice.

383 I (Charlie), as an alternative example, would arrive at training sessions early to help
384 prepare equipment, and in doing so, spend time with the coaching staff. This helped me to build
385 a relationship with the coaches that was mutually understood; I would probe the coaches for
386 their understanding and descriptions, while in return I would be probed for my dressing room
387 insights. Such exchanges of information, although never explicit, emphasised how roles were
388 not fixed in time. Indeed, *insider* or *outsider* categorise were too simplistic, for the same scene
389 could simultaneously be ‘insider’ to the coaches when being asked to judge others’
390 performance in a coffee shop, while being made ‘outsider’ in the following sentence when the
391 coaches refused to discuss team selection – a revelation that spoke volumes about the context
392 under study.

393 In summary, participant observation can be an exhausting task that researchers must
394 prepare themselves for, and one that can take an emotional toll. Certainly, in my (Rob) case,
395 ‘lifting the veil’ on coaching in an environment that I enjoyed, was emotionally invested in,
396 and had developed meaningful social bonds, led to feelings of disenchantment and
397 disillusionment with the work. When exiting the fieldwork, I was – and still remain – outwardly
398 critical of the knowledge-practices that I was an embodied product and producer of. Writing

about my time with the team risked alienation or detachment from many of the friendships and relationships that I had developed, or a ‘social death’ from that particular coaching field, limiting future access or progression. A point that echoed much of Charlie’s experiences, which led us (Rob and Charlie) to spend hours acting as critical friends to discuss the insecurities, subjectivities, and methodological dilemmas that such research methods pose. An apt point to finish this chapter lies in recognising the importance of using others (e.g., supervisors, participants, fellow researchers, students) to help familiarise and de-familiarise the work of participant observation as a means of enriching coaching scholarship.

End-of-chapter critical questions

1. What is the value of observation as a research method to sport coaching research?
2. What are the tensions researchers need to be prepared to negotiate when conducting participant observation?
3. What role does reflexivity have in relation to participant observation as a research method?
4. How can scholars engaging in observation data collection maintain the quality of insights and contribution to sport coaching as a community?
5. Who are the critical friends I can use to support me engaging with participant observation?

Endnotes

1 - Our use of the term ‘fieldwork’ reflects a canon of approaches to doing observational research. From the outset, it is noteworthy that the term has received scrutiny as part of the broader critique of dominant, Western approaches to research that (unfairly) represent some – particularly Indigenous - cultures “through imperial eyes” (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999, p. 42). Many

institutions have opted to remove the word ‘field’ (i.e., “fieldwork” and “fieldworker”) from their curriculums due to the connotations with slavery and colonialism. We have opted to not completely abandon the label to reflect the range of observational research descriptions, but we recognise the importance of discussing historically contentious terms.

2 - This term has come under scrutiny for its Colonial or Imperialistic overtones. See Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffins (2007) for a critique of the term’s use.

3 - Discreet note taking for transcription at a later date is often the most pragmatic way of collecting observational data. However, critics of such approaches argue that such memory work and recall undermine the realities of the research process, resulting in fieldwork accounts that can be overly sanitised or smoothed over (Punch, 2012). Of course, the extent to which you can capture and represent the flow of social discourse is debated, and depends on whether you are ‘collecting’ data, or ‘generating’ it. The important point is that you produce a more or less coherent representation of an observed cultural reality as a basis for future writing, interpretation and representation.

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