

Participant Observation

Sociology

Overt against covert observation, and what each costs the researcher.

Overt

- Role disclosed to the group
- Informed consent is possible
- Can ask direct questions
- Risk of the observer effect
- Ethically the default position

Covert

- Role concealed from the group
- Consent cannot be obtained
- Questions may blow the cover
- Less reactivity in the setting
- Deception needs strong justification

THE DIFFERENCE THAT MATTERS

Covert work is defensible only where the setting is otherwise closed and the public interest is substantial.

Educational reference. Ethics committees, not researchers, judge that balance. Legal exposure and risk of harm both apply.