Participant Observation

The basics

- P.O. is where a researcher takes part in the day to day life of the group they are studying
- Overt = where respondents know the researcher is a researcher
- Covert = where the researcher deceives the respondents into thinking they are 'one of them'
- Closely related to ethnography
- Typically involves using other methods such as interviews

Strengths

- Interpretivists prefer P.O.
- High validity
  - In their natural setting (unlike experiments)
  - See what people do, not just what they say they do
- Verstehen - empathetic understanding
  - Researcher sees the world through the respondents' eyes/ walks in their shoes
- Flexibility - open ended, allows researcher to stumble on the unexpected
- Practical strengths
  - Very few, but might be the only realistic method for researching deviant groups
- Ethical strengths
  - Respondent led, avoids 'master-client' relationship
  - Can give the powerless a voice

Limitations

- Theoretical disadvantages
  - Validity might be compromised
    - Hawthorne effect
    - Going native
  - Low reliability
    - Relies on personal characteristics and skills of researcher
  - Difficult to make generalisations
  - Typically poor representativeness due to small samples
- Positivists avoid
- Practical disadvantages
  - Time consuming and expensive
  - Requires certain skills such as empathy
  - Gaining access can be a problem
- Ethical problems
  - Covert - deception
  - Legality has been a problem in some studies -e.g. Venkatesh

Examples/ nature of topic

- Useful for deviant and unusual groups who the researcher knows little about
- Willis - Learning to Labour
- Venkatesh - Gang Leader for a Day

Advantages of Overt compared to Covert P.O.

- It's easier to follow up at a later stage
- You can take on the role of the 'professional stranger'
- It's less stressful
- You can ask awkward, probing questions
- You can combine it with other methods