PARTICIPANT APPROACH

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Researchers immerse themselves in the lives of research participants.

Duration	**Preparation:** 2 hours–8 weeks (depending on accessibility and legal regulations) **Activity:** 4 hours–4 weeks (depending on number and availability of interviewees and researchers) **Follow-up:** 2 hours–4 weeks (depending on amount of data)
Physical requirements	Notebook, photo camera, voice recorder, video camera, legal agreements (consent and/or confidentiality agreement)
Energy level	High
Researchers/Facilitators	Minimum 1 (a better approach is to have teams of 2–3 researchers)
Participants	Minimum 5 (but aim for at least 20 per group)
Expected output	Text (transcripts, field notes), audio recordings, photos, videos, artifacts

With this approach, the people who are being observed know that researchers are present and that they are currently being observed in situations that are relevant to the research question. This is the difference compared to non-participant observation, where research subjects do not know that they are being observed. Since researchers are visible, it is important to manage the "observer effect" – the influence researchers have on their environment and on their research participants' behavior simply by being present. There's a fluid transition between participant observation and contextual interviews, and often these go hand in hand. Try to balance out biases like the observer effect by cross-checking with other (non-participant) research methods.[01]

Researchers can observe situations that include digital and physical actions with or without other people and/or machines. In this context, participant

01 According to one of the seminal books on participant observation from 1980, there's a continuum in the level of researcher involvement from non-participatory to passive, moderate, active, and complete participation. See (new edition) Spradley, J. P. (2016). *Participant Observation*. Waveland Press.

observation is particularly useful to understand cross-channel experiences, as the method focuses on people and not on one particular channel. Depending on the research question and context, observations might be at the participants' workplace, in their homes, or even following them throughout a process like a holiday trip.

During participant observations it is important to observe not only what people are doing, by interpreting their body language and gestures, but also what people are *not* doing (e.g., do they ignore instructions or refrain from asking for help or assistance?).

(A) When researchers conduct participant observations, they often switch between rather passively observing situations and actively asking questions to get a deeper understanding of user needs.

(B) Humor sometimes helps to create trust between researchers and participants. Trust is particularly important for longer participant observations.

Step-by-step guide

1 Define specific research question
Define your research question or a set of questions about what you want to find out. Consider why you are doing research (exploratory vs. confirmatory research), what you want to do with your findings (personas, journey maps, system maps, etc.), and what sample size you'll probably need.

2 Identify participants
Based on your research question, define criteria for selecting suitable participants, considering not only who you interview, but also when and where. Use sampling techniques to select your research participants, and consider including internal experts or external agencies for participant recruitment.

3 Plan and prepare
Plan how you will approach your research participants, what expectations you will set up front, how you will start and end, and how much time you will plan for the participant observation. Write up observation guidelines based on what you want to find out. Also consider who you want to include as researchers from the client side or from other departments involved in the project. Agree on how you'll document the observations and set up legal agreements if necessary, to take voice recordings, photos, or videos, besides your field notes.

4 Conduct observations
During participant observation, try to balance out a possible observer effect by striving to influence the research participants as little as possible while at the same time being as close as necessary. Research subjects often consciously or unconsciously behave differently when they feel observed – it's even worse when they are filmed or photographed. To handle this, it's crucial to establish trust between researchers and participants during participant observations. This often requires more time than initially expected. You can mix participant observation with other methods, such as contextual or retrospective interviews. Use the situational context and ask participants to explain their specific activities, artifacts, behavior, motivations, needs, pains, or gains. Sometimes contradictions between what people say and what people do can be very revealing if you mirror behavior back to participants. During your observations, try to collect as much unbiased "first-level construct" raw data as possible. The length and depth of participant observations varies with the research objective: from several quick 15-minute observations at a specific moment in a customer journey to observations over several days or sometimes even weeks.

METHOD

5 **Follow-up**

Write up your individual key learnings right after the observations and compare them within your team. Keep track of all your documentation (e.g., by indexing your field notes, transcripts, photos, audio and video recordings, and collected artifacts) and highlight important passages. For each participant observation, write a short summary that includes your conflated key findings as well as raw data to exemplify these, such as quotes, photos, or videos. Don't forget to link the summary to your underlying data (that's where indexing comes in very handy).

Variants

Participant observation is an umbrella term for a variety of methods, such as shadowing, a day in the life, or work-along. The main differences between these methods are based on who

you observe (e.g., work-along) and if you follow research subjects over time (e.g., a day in the life) and sometimes also through different physical spaces (e.g., shadowing). However, the terms overlap to a large extent and are often used interchangeably:

— **A day in the life** uses participant observation to understand the everyday lives of people (mostly customers) over a certain time span, from a few hours up to several days. It is useful to develop or validate personas as well as to understand the wider context of customer needs. Researchers mostly focus on customers' routines, rituals, behaviors, environment, interactions, and conversations, or products customers use during the day. "A day in the life" often uses a combination of participant observation with contextual or retrospective interviews to understand the reasons behind why subjects do certain activities,

their motivations and attitudes. Often, the research is visualized in the form of a journey map to show the actions of a customer during that day in a timeline or as a system map to visualize the various stakeholders that customers interact with during a day.

— **Work-along** focuses on employees in their work environment to understand their daily routines and informal networks. Work-alongs are mostly a mix of participant observation and contextual interviews, but can also include call monitoring, virtual ethnography, and non-participant observation. Researchers often behave as trainees or interns and work together with employees for several days. They look over employees' shoulders to learn about their everyday work routines and their interactions and conversations with fellow employees, clients, customers, and other stakeholders,

to understand internal processes as well as formal and informal networks, corporate culture, and tone of voice. Researchers should pay attention to the workarounds employees use to cope with existing corporate structures and processes. Often, looking at the sticky notes you find around the workplace is a great start to understand the hacks and shortcuts people use to operate more efficiently. Researchers need to be sensitive to their work-along participants, as their presence can be very invasive at times. Also, the presence of researchers often affects people's behavior (the observer or Hawthorne effect),[01] so researchers should be mindful of this. To enrich data collected during a work-along, researchers can collect artifacts, such as instructions, internal documents, catalogues, emails, transcripts, and so on.

— **Shadowing** refers to researchers following research subjects (mostly customers) over time and often also through the physical spaces of their lives, like a shadow, in order to observe their behavior and understand their processes and experiences. Shadowing is often much shorter than a work-along, sometimes lasting only a few minutes, or up to several hours. It is important to clarify researcher status and boundaries with all participants before you start your research. Shadowing enables researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of experiences from the participants' perspective. It normally also includes contextual interviews at critical moments (e.g., when a customer has a problem or someone uses an interesting workaround). Often, the research participants themselves wouldn't recognize a critical situation as such, since they are accustomed to it (e.g., common problems they have every day). Shadowing will

reveal insights you won't find with mere interviews – either because participants do not tell the truth (e.g., due to social pressure) or simply because they are not aware of their own behavior.

Method notes

→ If research participants communicate or retrieve information, collect information on which channels they are using; if they choose from various available channels, try to find out why they prefer a certain channel over others.

→ Depending on the country and organization you're working with, do not forget to check what kind of legal, ethical, and confidentiality agreements you need up front and if necessary communicate them in advance to your research participants. ◄

01 See #TiSDD 5.1.3, *Data collection*, for more information on potential biases.