

Participant observation as a method of social sciences research and undercover police operations - conceptual differences and apparent similarities between criminology and criminal investigation

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The paper provides a review of literature on participant observation in social sciences and undercover police operations in Slovenia, presenting similarities and differences between the method of participant observation in criminological research and the method of undercover police operations in the investigation of crime. Although observation is common to both methods, their aims are completely different. In criminological research, participant observation is a method which is popular on the one hand but unpopular on the other and, at the same time, a method in which a researcher can be well- or ill-informed. It follows from this that such researchers can be called hostile spies, antipathetic members, friendly allies or friendly beginners or adherents. The aim of participant observation is not to detect criminal offenders but to study certain specifics, what can have wider implications than undercover police operations, which is exactly defined by law whereby it is stipulated that data must be protected and used exclusively for criminal investigation purposes. It is important to stress that a researcher, using the method of participant observation, must have a supervisor in order to preserve relative objectivity. Critics of participant observation consider this method to be 'psychological spying' and think that it can arouse feelings of dissatisfaction and mistrust and lead to the theory of conspiracy and abuse for political purposes. In undercover police operations it is important - if the case does not get an epilogue, i.e. if the police do not collect enough evidence against a suspect - to protect data carefully, not to violate human dignity and to respect all legal provisions regulating this field of activity.

Key words: criminology, participant observation, criminal investigation, undercover police operations, Slovenia

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