**HOW TO CONDUCT OBSERVATIONS**

by Simon Moss

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| **Introduction** |

Researchers, when conducting qualitative research, primarily utilize interviews to collect data. However, other methods often complement or supersede interviews, such as analysis of texts and observations of individuals. This document offers some insights on how to observe participants systematically and appropriately.

Observational research can be beneficial in many circumstances (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). For example, unlike interviews, the preconceptions or motives of participants do not bias the observations of researchers. In addition, when observing some event or circumstance—from marital discord to drug users—the researcher develops a vivid appreciation of the event or circumstances. Consequently, their intuitions and insights about this event or circumstance tend to be more accurate (for some underlying mechanisms, see Lee, Amir, & Ariely, 2009).

Yet observational research can be detrimental as well. To observe participants, researchers need to dedicate significant time to this endeavour. The researchers might inadvertently affect the behaviour of participants as well. Finally, the preconceptions and preferences of researchers can bias their observations and conclusions.

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| **What is observation in research** |

Of course, all researchers who interact with participants will observe these individuals to some extent. However, in research, the term *observation* is used in a more restricted sense. In particular, observation entails

* **noting** some phenomenon, such as marital conflict or board meetings
* with **all senses** rather than only vision
* usually with some **instrument** or procedure to collect data systematically
* to answer some **theoretical question**

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| **Kinds of observation** |

Some researchers, such as Gold (1958), distinguish four kinds of observations, varying on the role of researchers. The following table distinguishes these four kinds.

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| Role | Description |
| Complete observer | * The researcher attempts to be as inconspicuous as possible * Seldom used today because often entails deception and other ethical concerns * Sometimes necessary—epitomized by a famous but perhaps unethical study, in previous decades, about how people behave in public bathrooms |
| Observer-as-participant | * The researcher is introduced to participants, but primarily interacts with these individuals in the role of a researcher and outsider * That is, they might occasionally speak to participants, but primarily observe these individuals and record notes quietly |
| Participant-as-observer | * The researcher is more embedded in the lives of participants * These researchers partly assume the role of a friend or colleague—but acknowledge their role as a researcher as well |
| Complete participant | * The researchers completely engage in the activities of participants—and may hardly acknowledge their role as researchers, raising ethical concerns too * They are often members of the culture they study |

When researchers adopt the observer-as-participant or participant-as-observer roles—the two prevalent kinds—they engage in the activities to varying extents. Indeed, scholars sometimes distinguish three levels (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1987, 1994), as the following table shows.

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| Level of membership | Description |
| Peripheral membership | * Although they interact closely with participants, these researchers do not engage in the activities that define group membership * For example, to study a drug culture, they might interact with the participants but not use or sell drugs themselves |
| Active membership | * The researchers do engage in the core activities that define group membership * But they do not necessarily commit themselves to the values, attitudes, and goals of this group * For example, they might agree to experiment with some act to understand the group better |
| Complete membership | * These researchers adopt the values, attitudes, and goals of this group—and may even advocate on behalf of this group |

All these levels of membership represent a perspective called participant observation, in which researchers learn from their exposure to the routine activities of a group (Savage, 2000).

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| **When is observation a suitable technique?** |

Researchers primarily utilize observation to study a particular setting, such as a school, or a particular event, such as a concert or election. Observation may also be utilised to clarify differences between groups, such as differences in parenting between Asian families and European families. However, to conduct observation effectively, researchers should be able to

* understand the language and jargon of the participants
* remember details well, because they cannot always record all details immediately
* write well enough to describe their observations effectively
* question their preconceptions rather than merely adopt the prevailing assumptions of society
* become attuned to mundane details—details that most people will disregard. That is, they should be able to notice subtle events that other people could overlook.

Arguably, training in mindfulness might help researchers notice these subtle details. If researchers are not mindful, extraneous memories or irrelevant worries might distract their attention.

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| **Which activities does observation entail** |

So, how should you conduct observational research? Which activities do you need to complete? The following table outlines the main activities that you should consider.

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| Activity | Considerations |
| Select a site or event | * Is the site or event relevant to your theoretical question? * Is the site or event convenient to access? * Is the site or event distinct from settings or circumstances that have been studied before? * Are you welcome by relevant individuals to study this site or event? |
| Gain access | * Who are the official people who can approve access? * Who can introduce you to these people? * From who else should you receive approval for cultural or political reasons? For example, in Aboriginal communities, you need to seek approval and support from relevant elders. |
| Become familiar with the site or event | * Before you arrive, organize activities that could help you address your negative emotions and feel more comfortable. * For example, you might organize someone to introduce you to the community * Allocate time merely to feel comfortable in this site or setting   If working with other people, such as translators   * you need time to become familiar with these individuals, and they need time to become familiar with you * you should share your goals with these individuals and grant these individuals an opportunity to share their goals with you |
| Initially, record unstructured data | * At this time, you cannot be as certain about what events are and are not important * So, if not sure whether to record some event or behavior, record this event or behavior.   Silverman (2008) and other researchers stipulate some questions that can help you prioritize which observations to record   * What behaviors or details diverged from your predictions? * What are individuals striving to achieve—and how are they attempting to achieve this goal? * How do people describe or understand the behaviors or circumstances? * What assumptions or beliefs do their comments or behaviors imply? * What did you learn from these notes or observations? * Why did you record these notes in particular? * How do you feel as you collect these data—and how might these feelings be affecting which data you am collecting? * What other events could be distracting your attention? |
| Proceed to more structured methods | * You might gradually develop checklists, grids, or tables to record data * Later, this document presents some examples of how to record observations more systematically |
| As you begin to notice patterns, other research questions will emerge | * Adapt your research or observation methods to explore these questions |
| Continue until you reach theoretical saturation | * Theoretical saturation is the point at which observations consistency replicate the patterns you have observed |

To record data, some researchers continue to describe specific events in written form. Other researchers prefer to complement these descriptions with checklists, grids, and tables. To illustrate, if researchers want to observe conflicts between partners, they might utilize the following checklist, grid, or table.

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| Before a conflict | | During a conflict | | After a conflict | |
| Pause in speech | Changed facial expression | Crossed arms | Change in posture | Silence | Embrace |
|  |  | ✓ |  | ✓ |  |
| ✓ |  |  |  | ✓ |  |
|  |  | ✓ |  |  |  |

Each column corresponds to a separate behaviour—a behaviour that previous theories or observations indicate might be prevalent or relevant. Each row may correspond to

* a separate interval, such as 1.30 to 1.35 pm, 1.50 to 1.55 pm, and so forth—sometimes called the interval method
* a separate instance of the behavior; for example, each time the individuals raise their voice, the researcher might begin a row—sometimes called an event-based method

The ticks, therefore, indicate whether the behaviour was observed at a specific time or in response to a specific event.

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| **Quality in observational research: Criteria** |

So, how can you differentiate excellent observational research from mediocre observational research? How can you improve the quality of this research? The answer to this question partly depends on the theoretical perspective you adopt. Whether you adopt a constructivist perspective, a critical perspective, or another philosophy determines which features epitomize excellent research (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). To illustrate, if you adopt a constructivist perspective—in which you attempt to understand how people conceptualize their lives rather than strive to uncover one objective truth—you would utilize the criteria in the following table.

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| Qualities of excellent research: Constructivism | |
| Criteria | Clarification |
| Acknowledges biases | * Researchers clarify their own experiences with some phenomenon and preconceptions, such as marital conflict—often called a position statement * Researcher discuss how these experiences and preconceptions could bias their observations and interpretations |
| Trustworthy conclusions | * The researchers clarified how they derived the results and conclusions from the data * Several distinct methods, researchers, or circumstances generated the same results and conclusions |
| Authentic | * The results seem realistic, feasible, credible, and consistent |
| Reflexivity | * The researchers were attuned to how they reached decisions and also questioned their assumptions |
| Celebrating unique instances | * The researcher underscored and presented, rather than dismissed or concealed, cases or circumstances that deviate from the overall patterns or conclusions. |
| Crystalization | * The researcher utilized as many perspectives, media, and genres as possible to represent some event—such as poetry, art, narrative, and so forth * All these perspectives were integrated to generate a rich, nuanced depiction of some event or phenomenon |
| Contributes to dialogue | * Generated further discussion and exploration |

In contrast, if you espouse critical theory—in which you strive to characterize the inequalities and injustices in society—you would utilize the criteria in the following table instead.

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| Qualities of excellent research: Critical theory | |
| Criteria | Clarification |
| Awareness of injustice | * The results underscore some injustice or inequity |
| Sources of injustice | * The conclusions clarify the causes and nature of some injustice |
| Respectful to disadvantaged | * The research respects and underscores the perspective of individuals who are not granted positions of power or status |
| Clarifies mechanism of power | * The research shows how powerful echelons maintain and exploit their power |
| Engagement | * The researcher engages respectfully and collaboratively with segments of society that are not as powerful |
| Inspires change | * The research helps segments of society that are not as powerful initiate action and overcome challenges |

Finally, if you espouse positivism—in which you strive to uncover some objective truth or reality, more common in quantitative research—you would utilize the criteria in the following table instead.

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| Qualities of excellent research: Positivism | |
| Criteria | Clarification |
| Objectivity | * The results and conclusions should be independent of the preconceptions or preferences of researchers |
| Validity | * The results should resemble some underlying truth or reality |
| Systematic rigour and reliability | * The results should not be dependent on random, unpredictable events * To achieve this goal, the data need to be collected systematically and rigorously. |
| Generalizability | * The results and conclusions should apply to settings and circumstances outside the study |
| Support of causal hypotheses | * The results should align to the predictions of theories—and thus verify these theories |

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| **Quality in observational research: Techniques** |

Despite this variation across perspectives, many observational researchers apply similar techniques to enhance the credibility of their research (Flick, 2007). For example, researchers can

* apply analytic induction, in which they deliberately strive to uncover data or observations that diverge from the patterns they emerge—to assess whether their conclusions are accurate or not
* write their descriptions of observations as vividly as possible, called verisimilitude. Because these descriptions are vivid, readers can more readily ascertain whether these depictions seem plausible and consistent with their own experiences or intuitions
* to assess whether their research has affected the behavior of participants, introduce a range of measures. For example, they could record their observations over a longer period, because participants may habituate to their presence. They should also develop rapport to demonstrate they are not judgmental
* utilize triangulation in which they ascertain whether the insights derived from other techniques, such as surveys or instruments, resonate with the conclusions that emanated from observations
* repeat the observations several times to show the main patterns seem consistent over time; for example, the researcher might show that, whenever one member of a couple becomes more forceful, the other member becomes more submissive
* organize several researchers to conduct the observations at the same time—or to rate the same video footage (e.g., Flick, 2007).

Nevertheless, researchers should be aware of several caveats. First, not all researchers believe that observations should be reliable or consistent over time. Postmodern researchers, for example, assume that behaviour may not follow regular patterns or laws and, therefore, are not as concerned about reliability.

Second, variations across time or researchers might uncover important insights. For example, rather than imply the observations are not reliable, such inconsistency might indicate that people deliberately shift their patterns of behaviour for various reasons. They might not, for instance, want to be perceived as predictable.

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| **The ethics of observation** |

Observational techniques raise many ethical concerns, such as invasion of privacy. To manage these concerns appropriately, researchers have reached a general consensus about which research activities are appropriate. For example

* researchers should not misrepresent their identity to gain access to some private setting
* researchers should not misrepresent the purpose of their research
* researchers should not record behaviors if they feel that participants would be ashamed, distressed, or potentially harmed if aware of these recordings

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