**HOW TO CONDUCT SYSTEMATIC SELF-OBSERVATION**

by Simon Moss

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| **Introduction** |

Systematic self-observation is a methodology in which several participants are invited to observe, and then report, a specific phenomenon in their own lives (see Rodriguez & Ryave, 2002). They might, for example, be instructed to observe and report times in which they lied, conveyed secrets, withheld compliments, and so forth. Past research indicates this approach is economical and reliable.

**Purpose**

The underlying purpose of systematic self-observation is to understand the pattern of thoughts, feelings, and events that shape ordinary or mundane experiences as accurately as possible, such as lying. That is, the aim is to study the motives, memories, thoughts, emotions, or withheld actions of people that accompany behaviour. Unlike other approaches, systematic self-observation can clarify phenomena that tend to be unobservable—as well as phenomena of which people are sometimes unaware, such as their lies or secrets.

**Main phases**

Systematic self-observation tends to comprise a sequence of activities. In particular, the researcher

* identifies a suitable phenomenon or topic—usually an elusive circumstance that people experience intermittently and is short in duration, such as telling a lie
* translates this phenomenon or topic to a simple, tangible description that participants can readily understand
* recruits relevant participants, sometimes called informants, who are often university students, studying in this discipline
* instils in these participants the importance of reliable, valid, honest, and systematic scientific enquiry
* shows these participants how to observe this phenomenon, without altering their behaviour; that is, these participants should be mindful of when this phenomenon, such as lying, transpires and then to observe their thoughts and emotions during this moment
* teaches these participants how to report this phenomenon as accurately and immediately as possible
* offers some training exercises to help inculcate these principles
* invites participants to complete this observation within a limited timeframe, such as one week
* writes a report that integrates the observations of participants

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| **Theoretical perspective** |

Systematic self-observation emanated from a variety of traditions, such as symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, semiotics, and conversation analysis as well as from the work of Erving Goffman. Nevertheless, researchers who implement systematic self-observation do not need to apply these perspectives. Yet, most researchers who apply systematic self-observation tend to assume that

* the assumptions or preconceptions of researchers can bias their interpretations of participants during interviews or other data collection methods; hence, systematic self-observation can generate data that diminishes the impact of these biases because the data are expressed in the voice of informants
* interviews and other data collection methods tend to be retrospective; consequently, participants might overlook important information, because their behaviour is habitual and thus not as accessible to recall
* vital insights about society can be derived from understanding ordinary experiences in life

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| **Differences to existing methods** |

Systematic self-observation does resemble other introspective methods, but includes some unique features. The following table clarifies how systematic self-observation diverges from these alternatives.

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| Alternatives | How systematic self-observation  diverges from these alternative |
| Interactive introspection (Ellis, 1991) | In systematic self-observation, the researcher no longer interacts with participants after these participants begin to observe and report their experiences |
| The approach that Wieder and Zimmerman (1977) utilized | In systematic self-observation, participants observe their experiences only after some trigger—that is, only after they notice the relevant phenomenon, such as an inclination to lie. In other approaches, participants might observe all events during some duration |
| Rochester and Iowa Interaction Records event-contingent questionnaires | In systematic self-observation, no structure is imposed on how participants record the experiences; in some other approaches, participants need to complete some inventory |

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| **How to conduct systematic self-observation** |

The following table outlines how you should conduct the sequence of activities. In particular, this table includes some examples or clarifications about each phase.

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| Phase | Examples or clarifications |
| Identify a suitable phenomenon or topic | Systematic self-observation is not a suitable approach to study all phenomena. In particular the phenomena of interest should be   * a behaviour that tends to be covert or elusive rather than overt; you should not, for example, utilize this approach to study how people complain   In particular, the phenomenon should be an experience that is   * repeated intermittently, perhaps 5 to 20 times a week * bounded and short in duration, such as a few minutes * defined precisely and specifically—such as times I was afraid to disclose a thought rather than times I was not open; otherwise, participants cannot determine whether or not they have experienced this phenomenon * restricted to a specific setting, such as conversations with one partner not people in general; otherwise, participants need to monitor their behaviour too frequently * a phenomenon of which participants are aware; the phenomenon of daydreaming is thus not a good example   Suitable topics include times in which people   * overheard something * could not think of what to say * felt upset over the success of a friend * received criticism * disclosed personal doubts * regretted something they said * blamed themselves * faked confidence |
| Translate this phenomenon or topic to a simple, tangible description that participants can readily understand | * avoid technical jargon when defining the phenomenon for participants; use everyday language instead * do not feel the need to define words precisely; if the phenomenon is secrets and somebody asks you to clarify the definition, you could reply “Anything that secrets means to you”—because you might then unearth variations that you had not considered * if participants are not sure whether some experience is relevant, invite these individuals to report this experience anyway |
| Recruit relevant participants | * The number of participants might range from 3 to 15; you would usually train all participants together, if possible, to ensure consistency * University students are often willing to participate, because they might learn valuable information during this procedure * But, who is most relevant depends on your interests and research question |
| Instil in these participants the importance of reliable, valid, honest, and systematic scientific enquiry | * Show how reliable, valid, detailed, accurate, and honest observations could greatly affect your research * Highlight examples in which people might not be reliable or accurate—such as the tendency to excuse their faults |
| Show these participants how to observe this phenomenon, without altering their behaviour | * Participants should proceed with their life as usual * They should tell themselves “Whenever I notice this phenomenon, I will merely observe, but not change, my thoughts and feelings”. They could repeat this instruction to themselves several times, called an implementation intention * That is, they should not attempt to change, question, slow, or expedite their behaviour, thoughts, or feelings—but merely to observe their natural responses * They should not evaluate their thoughts, feelings, or behaviour any more than perhaps they would naturally * They should be informed they should not be concerned if the experience never transpires; the absence of this experience is also valuable data   Interestingly, past reports indicate that participants can readily observe their experience without altering their responses. The reason is the experience is usually habitual, so they can continue these thoughts and feelings effortlessly |
| Teach these participants how to report this phenomenon as accurately and immediately as possible | * Their role is to describe rather than evaluate this experience * They should be encouraged to transcribe their experience as immediately as possible—and thus to carry a laptop, tablet, or pen and paper whenever possible   They can write anything they like, but should include   * the setting or circumstance in which they experienced the phenomenon, such as during dinner * the relationships between themselves and other people; they should utilize codes to maintain the anonymity of these other people * they should specify their thoughts and feelings immediately before, during, and after this phenomenon * they could include the words spoken or other tangible information as well   The participants might write some brief notes immediately and then expand these notes later, when time allows. |
| Offers some training exercises to help inculcate these principles | * Sometimes, to practice, participants are first encouraged to apply this method to monitor their lies or secretes for a day * To practice, participants could also receive sample reports |
| Invites participants to complete this observation within a limited timeframe | * This timeframe could range from 2 days to 2 weeks, perhaps depending on logistics or the frequency with which this phenomenon naturally transpires |
| Writes a report that integrates the observations of participants |  |

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| **References** |

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