11

OBSERVATION STUDIES

No doubt it will seem unnecessary to remind you, once again, that before you begin to consider observation as one of your data-collecting techniques, you need first to decide *what* you wish to observe, *what* your main areas of interest are and *why* you think observation will produce the information you need. Is it to be one of several data-collecting methods or the only one? Are you considering observation as a form of validating other evidence? Do you really need evidence from observation, because it requires considerable skill, 'a capacity for original thinking and the ability to spot significant events. It is certainly not an easy option' (Nisbet 1977: 15). Careful planning and piloting are essential, and it takes practice to get the most out of this technique. However, once mastered, it can reveal characteristics of groups or individuals which would have been impossible to discover by other means. Interviews, as Nisbet and Watt (1980: 13) point out, provide important data, but they reveal only how people *perceive* what happens, not necessarily what actually happens. Observation can be useful in discovering whether people do what they say they do, or behave in the way they claim to behave. However, observation also depends on the way people perceive what is being said or done.

On occasions, I have been to meetings and after discussing what happened with colleagues, I have begun to wonder whether I was

at the same meeting. We had very different recollections of who said what and what decisions were made. If three or four people stand at a window overlooking a busy street, observing what is going on for five minutes or so, and then write up what they have seen, the accounts are likely to vary. The observers will have their own focus and will interpret significant events in their own way. As observers, we 'filter' the material we obtain from observation and that can lead us to impose our own interpretations on what is observed and so fail to understand 'what an activity means for those who are involved in it' (Darlington and Scott 2002: 75–6).

The fact that we are all fallible does not mean there is little point in including observation as one of our data-collecting techniques but it does mean that we have to be particularly aware of the dangers, do our best to eliminate preconceived ideas and prejudices and constantly look out for possible signs of bias.

Solo observers are always in danger of accusations of bias or misinterpretation and particularly if you are researching in your own professional area, try to persuade, or even blackmail a friend or fellow student to join you for as many observation sessions as can be managed.

Observation can be structured or unstructured, participant or non-participant. Each approach has some advantages but also disadvantages. All require a degree of expertise, some more than others; but if you have, after careful thought, decided to include observation as one of your data-collecting instruments, then you will need to decide which approach to adopt, and why.

Unstructured observation



Researchers who decide to adopt an unstructured approach to observation generally do so because though they may have a clear idea of the purpose of the observation, they may not be so clear about the detail. They are prepared to spend sufficient time on fieldwork, familiarization and accumulation of data, from which they anticipate that focus and structure will emerge (Punch 1998: 186). In other words, as in grounded theory, the researcher will 'Postpone definitions and structures until a pattern has been observed . . . The researcher develops the conceptual categories

from the data and then continues with the fieldwork in order to elaborate these while the data are still available for access' (Bowling 2002: 367).

Unstructured observation can be useful to generate hypotheses, but it is not easy to manage. If the nature of your research points you in the direction of unstructured observation, read as widely as you can, ask colleagues and friends if they know of anyone who successfully adopted this approach and consult your supervisor before you commit yourself to this – or for that matter any other approach.

Participant observation



Some of the disadvantages of unstructured observation may also apply to participant observation, which involves the researcher participating in the daily life of an individual, group or community and listening, observing, questioning and understanding (or trying to understand) the life of the individuals concerned. In some cases, researchers may have been involved for months or even years in a community in order to become generally accepted as one of the group. In others, researchers remained clearly outside the group, as was Lacey (1976: 65) who wrote about his experiences at 'Hightown Grammar' where, for three years, he taught, observed classes and talked to teachers and pupils.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison draw attention to some of the criticisms levelled at participant observation.

> The accounts that typically emerge from participant observations echo the criticisms of qualitative data ... being described as subjective, biased, impressionistic, idiosyncratic and lacking in the precise quantifiable measures that are the hallmark of survey research and experimentation. While it is probably true that nothing can give better insight into the life of a gang of juvenile delinquents than going to live with them for an extended period of time, critics of participant observation will point to the dangers of 'going native' as a result of playing a role within such a group.
>
> (Cohen et al. 2000: 313–14)

Experienced participant observers are well aware of the dangers of bias but it is difficult to stand back and adopt the role of objective observer when all the members of the group or organization are known to you. If you are researching in your own organization, you will be familiar with the personalities, strengths and weaknesses of colleagues, and this familiarity may cause you to overlook aspects of behaviour which would be immediately apparent to a non-participant observer seeing the situation for the first time.

In spite of the criticisms, participant observation can yield valuable data. Researchers are able to observe changes over time. Rather than having to depend on one-off observations or at best observations carried out over a limited period of time, the participant observer is able to share in the lives and activities of other people; to learn their language and interpret their meanings; to remember actions and speech; and to interact with people in their own environment (Burgess 1982: 45). By listening and experiencing, 'impressions are formed and theories considered, reflected upon, developed and modified' (May 2001: 174).

May acknowledges that:

> participant observation is not an easy method to perform, or to analyse, but despite the arguments of its critics, it is a systematic and disciplined study which, if performed well, greatly assists in understanding human actions and brings with it new ways of viewing the social world.
>
> (p. 174)

I agree, but in 100-hour projects, it might be unwise to undertake participant *or* unstructured observation unless you are already experienced, have the time and are very familiar with the techniques involved. In order to derive worthwhile information from the data, you will probably need to adopt a more structured approach and to devise some form of recording in order to identify aspects of behaviour which you have identified beforehand as being of likely relevance to the research.

Structured observation and keeping records

The structured approach can also be criticized as being subjective and biased. You have decided on the focus rather than allowing the focus to emerge. However, you will already have formulated a hypothesis or identified the objectives of your study and the importance of observing some aspect of behaviour will have become apparent.

Whether your observation is structured or unstructured and whether you are observing as a participant or a non-participant, your role is to observe and record in as objective a way as possible.

The fact that different observers can, and do produce different accounts of situations is worrying for all researchers who hope to include observation as one of their methods of collecting data. In Denscombe's opinion:

> It is precisely this problem which is addressed by systematic observation and its use of an *observation schedule*. The whole purpose of the schedule is to minimize, possibly eliminate, the variations that will arise from data based on individual perceptions of events and situations. Its aim is to provide a framework for observation which *all* observers will use.
>
> (Denscombe 2003: 194–5)

Observation schedules can take the form of a checklist, a diary, chart, time or critical incidents log – or whichever approach suits your purpose. Spradley (1980), Williams (1994), Denscombe (2003) and Bowling (2002) all give examples of charts, grids, categories and other methods of recording which will give you a range of useful ideas for devising schemes of your own. The sad fact is that in spite of all the tried-and-tested methods that have been employed by researchers over the years, there never seems to be an example that is quite right for a particular task. Inevitably, you will find you have to adapt or devise a completely new approach, and all new systems need careful piloting and refining in the light of experience. If you have access to only one group or one meeting, you must be quite sure that your selected method of recording is going to work. You will probably need to devise

your own system of shorthand symbols and these will have to be memorized because you can't always be consulting your notes during the course of a meeting or observation of a group. You will need to decide beforehand how often to record what is happening (all the time? every three seconds? every five minutes? every twenty minutes?) and with whom (all the group? individuals?).

Preparation is all-important. Charts and seating plans have to be prepared. You will need to discuss with whoever is in charge where it would be best to sit. Opinions vary. In a lecture room, there is some merit in sitting where the students can see you. At least that way they are not always turning round to see what you are doing, but if participants have other views, listen – and conform. An observer can never pass entirely unnoticed, but the aim is to be as unobtrusive as possible so that observed behaviour is as close to normal as possible.

It's impossible to record everything, so you need to be clear whether you are interested in the *content* or *process* of a group or meeting, in *interaction* between individuals, in the *nature of contributions* or in *some specific aspect* such as the effectiveness of questioning techniques. Once you have decided what you wish to find out and have satisfied yourself that you need this information to further your research, then you will be in a position to consider what methods of recording will best suit your purposes.

Recording behaviour

One of the commonly used methods of recording behaviour is based on a system of interaction-process analysis originally devised by R.F. Bales in 1950. He devised a method of classifying or coding under one of 12 headings which enabled the observer to make a record of the behaviour of individuals in groups. Examples of his categories of behaviour are 'shows tension release' and he then identifies indicators of tension release (jokes, laughs, shows satisfaction) and 'shows antagonism' (deflates others' status, defends or asserts self). Since 1950 many different types of approach have been devised, some relatively simple and others extremely complicated. The Flanders system, which was derived

from the Bales method of classifying behaviour, is one of the best known. Flanders (1970) devised ten categories of teacher/student behaviour (the Flanders interaction analysis categories), which the observer used as a basis for categorizing and recording what took place in the classroom. Observers were required to record what was happening every three seconds and to enter the appropriate category number on a prepared chart. The problem with Flanders-type systems is that the categories are quite complex, have numbers of sub-sections and inevitably involve the observer making some value judgements as to which category is closest to the particular types of behaviour.

The requirement to record every three seconds means that the observer has to be fully conversant with categories and criteria and to recall instantly the number assigned to particular aspects of behaviour. This takes a considerable amount of practice. The more complicated (and so more thorough) the system of categories, the harder it is to manage.

I have to confess that the one time I tried to use the 'every three seconds' approach was a failure. Trying to keep track of the time and at the same time observing and classifying activities under Flanders-type headings became impossible and so a simpler system had to be devised. I had go back to basics and to ask myself again why I was observing the meeting. What exactly did I want to find out? What was feasible to record? And only then was I able to eliminate any irrelevances and begin to simplify the categories.

Most researchers I know have devised their own system of categories, and limited them to about three or four. Are you interested in who is aggressive, time-wasting, positive in moving forward the business of the meeting, disagreeing about much (or all) that is being proposed – or none of those things? Ask yourself whether you are more interested in the *behaviour* of individuals or the *content* of what is being said. Or perhaps you might be interested only in how long each individual speaks and who is silent throughout. If one of your categories happened to be 'disagreement', participants may not need to speak. A lot can be deduced from facial expressions, nods, scowls or signs of dissent from the 'silent' individuals. It's up to you to decide on your categories and, once having decided, to devise ways of recording.

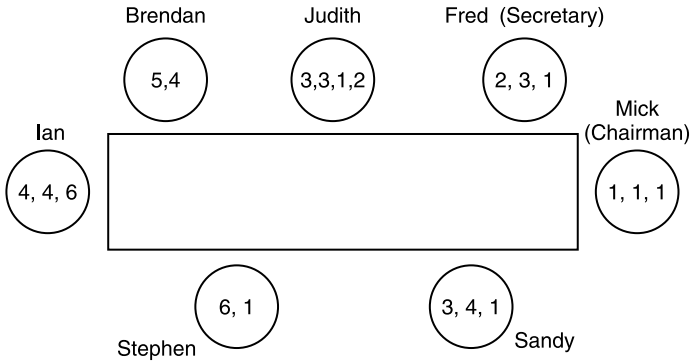


Figure 11.1 Table plan recording individual behaviour according to categories.

The way in which observations are recorded is a matter of personal preference. If you are observing a meeting, it's helpful to have a table plan before the meeting starts as in Figure 11.1. Each of the categories is given a number and obviously you will know which number applies to which category. In Figure 11.1, if category number 1 deals with aggressive behaviour, you would put '1' underneath or at the side of each participant for each indication of such behaviour. Or you could record behaviour in a chart as in Figure 11.2.

Contributions might also be plotted on a graph or presented in whichever way clearly illustrates the nature of the contributions made. And always bear in mind that it will not be enough merely to present the information as observed. Commentary on the significance (or lack of significance) will also be necessary.

Content

The analysis of the content of a meeting or group discussion is rather more straightforward. If the main interest is in who makes most contributions and spends most time speaking (not necessarily the same thing), then a simple chart on the lines

Participants	Categories						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	Totals
Chairman (Mick)	✓✓✓						(3)
Secretary (Fred)	✓	✓	✓				(3)
Judith	✓	✓	✓✓				(4)
Brendan				✓	✓		(2)
Ian				✓✓		✓	(3)
Stephen	✓					✓	(2)
Sandy	✓		✓	✓			(3)
Totals	(7)	(2)	(4)	(4)	(1)	(2)	

Figure 11.2 Chart recording total number of entries for each behaviour category.

shown in Figure 11.3 might be devised. In this case, a vertical line would indicate that the named person spoke for a set time (say, half a minute or less). A following horizontal line would indicate that the same person continued to speak for the same set period.

The previous examples appear to be fairly simple to manage and should produce useful, though limited, information. If all you need to know is who spoke most or which topics took up most time, then they will suffice and adaptations to these charts have been used to good effect in many different situations. However, if you wish to find out who says most about what, then a more complex system is needed, and it may be best to make fuller notes during the course of the observation and then transfer to a summary chart.

Do your best to get some observation practice to try out your recording skills. If you have the opportunity (and obtain permission) to attend a formal meeting as an observer, ask if you might see an agenda beforehand. Sometimes this will be granted;

Participants	
Mick	/// =
Fred	
Judith	/ ≡ //
Brendan	//
Ian	//// = / ≡
Stephen	//
Sandy	/ = //
Multiple speaking	///

Figure 11.3 Example of a chart recording speaking contributions by individuals.

sometimes not. It's a great help if you are able to see what items are to be considered, so it's worth asking.

If you are unable to attend any meetings, group sessions or classes, try out your recording skills on a television programme. Political discussions are good, because they often degenerate into arguments, with everyone speaking at the same time. Select no more than three categories, such as 'dissent', 'aggression', 'agreement', but make sure you are clear about how you define each of these categories. What are the indicators of 'aggression' (shouting, pointing of a finger, sneering, what else?) Devise your own chart and see if you can record the contributions. Ten minutes might be quite enough but that would give you ideas about the complexity of recording, even when your categories seem to be perfectly clear. You may discover that categories can sometimes overlap, contributions to the discussion can come thick and fast and you have to concentrate, to look at contributors' expressions, to listen

for mixed messages *and* to put your number in the right place at the right time. Your first shot at a chart may not suit you and so you will need to devise one or two different designs to see which you find easiest for recording, analysis and interpretation after the event.

A few words of warning – again



At the beginning of this chapter, I said that observation can often reveal characteristics of groups or individuals that would have been impossible to discover by other means. This has been demonstrated in many research studies which made extensive use of observation techniques, but the greatest care has to be taken to ensure that you get the most out of your periods of observation. You are unlikely to have three years in which to begin an investigation with an entirely open mind and to evolve hypotheses and methods as you go along. It is likely you will only have one opportunity to observe a meeting, group or class and so you will need to be quite clear about the purpose of your observation and why you are observing that particular group or individual. You may discover that unforeseen and interesting information emerges during the course of your observation, but you will be mainly dependent on the decisions taken before you begin your period of observation for the type of data you eventually gather. If you make a decision before a meeting that your main interest is the content of the meeting, then charts, grids or checklists have to be devised with that aim in mind. It will be too late to record interactions. If your main interest is process, then other methods will have to be found to record how a class or a meeting is conducted. As you select and refine your methods, keep constantly in mind the same old questions: 'What do I need to know?' 'Why do I need to know it?' and 'What shall I do with this information when I have it?'

Pilot exercises and practice in recording will answer some of these questions and will point to weaknesses in technique. When you begin your one-off observation exercise, you need to be as sure as you can that you are prepared and ready.

After the event

The task is not complete when the observation has taken place and records have been made. If you were observing a meeting and felt at the end of it that it was rather ineffectual, you would need to analyse the reasons. Was the process altogether too formal? Did the chair (or someone else) speak for 80 per cent of the time? Were contributions from some people dismissed? Some forms of interaction analysis can help you to classify process and content, but whatever methods of recording you have selected, it is essential to consider the event as a whole, as soon after the event as you can. Review in your mind what took place and decide whether any conclusions can be drawn that might be of interest in your study.

Useful though grids, forms and checklists are, they are limited. They cannot take account of emotions, micropolitical processes behind some of the interactions, the influence of certain key members of the group, and the effect they can have on the way meetings and discussions are conducted and decisions reached.

The work which goes into recording and adding up the numbers of committee or group members who showed aggression, agreement, dissent or who spoke for a specified period of time is important, but it is even more important to place what you observe in its organizational and/or curricular context, to look beyond the event itself and, in Nisbet's words, 'to spot significant events' (1977: 15).

Observation studies checklist

1 Decide exactly what you need to know.	List all topics/aspects about which information is required.
2 Consider why you need this information.	Examine your list and remove any item that is not directly associated with the task.
3 Is observation the best way of obtaining the information you need?	Consider alternatives.

4	Decide which aspects you need to investigate.	Are you particularly interested in content, process, interaction, intervention – or something else?
5	Request permission to observe.	Clear official channels and also discuss what is involved with the individuals concerned.
6	Devise a suitable grid, checklist or chart.	Consult published examples and adapt where necessary. Decide on your categories.
7	Consider what you will do with the information.	Is it likely to produce anything of interest? Will the data be sufficiently complete to enable you to come to any conclusions?
8	Pilot your method and revise if necessary and invite someone to observe with you. Compare notes afterwards to see if you saw the same things.	Memorize categories. Devise your own system of shorthand (symbols, letters, etc.). Practise recording until you are confident you can cope.
9	Prepare carefully before the observation.	Draw a plan of the room, indicating seating arrangements and layout. Make sure you have enough copies of grids or checklists. Consult minutes of previous meetings, agendas, schemes of work, etc.
10	Discuss where you will sit with whoever is in charge and with people who will be observed.	You want to be as unobtrusive as possible. Exactly where you sit will depend on your own preferences and the views of participants.
11	Remember that no grid, no matter how sophisticated, will tell the full story.	Try to place the event in its organizational context. Obtain as much information about the organization/institution/committee or group before the observation.

12	Always write up field notes as you go along, add items to your summary sheet and write your thoughts about significant events.	If you wait until you have time, you will forget important items.
13	Analyse and interpret the data. Do your best to eliminate bias or misinterpretation.	Statements about what has been observed are only part of the task. Consider what the facts indicate or imply.
14	Don't forget to thank the people who have allowed you to observe.	You may need their help again!

Further reading

Bowling, A. (2002) *Research Methods in Health: Investigating Health and Health Services*, 2nd edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press. Chapter 25, 'Unstructured and structured observational studies', provides useful information about participant observation; gaining access; establishing validity and reliability (reducing observer bias); structured and unstructured observations; and analysis and categorization of data. Page 375 gives a useful summary of the main points covered in the chapter.

Darlington, Y. and Scott, D. (2002) *Qualitative Research in Practice: Stories from the Field*. Maidenhead: Open University Press. First published in 2002 by Allen and Unwin in Australia. Chapter 4, 'Observation', is helpful and well worth consulting. The authors provide guidance about the observation process, including useful reminders about the ethics of observation. This chapter also includes discussions with two researchers who used observation in conjunction with various other methods of data collection.

Denscombe, M. (2003) *The Good Research Guide*, 2nd edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press. Chapter 11, 'Observation', of the second edition of this excellent book is well worth consulting. Denscombe covers the advantages and disadvantages of systematic observation; observation schedules; types of events and behaviour to be recorded; suitability for observation; sampling; the advantages and disadvantages of participant observation; making field notes (and the dangers of field work) and ethics. Two useful checklists are provided, one concerned

with observation schedules and the other a general checklist dealing with participant observation.

May, T. (2001) *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process*, 3rd edn. Buckingham: Open University Press. Chapter 7, 'Participant observation: perspectives and practice', pages 146–74, deals with the practice of social research (the researcher's role, access, field notes); the analysis of observations; and issues in participant observation.

Moyles, J. (2002) 'Observation as a research tool', in M. Coleman and R.F. Briggs (eds) *Research Methods in Educational Leadership and Management*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Punch, K.F. (1998) *Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*. London: Sage Publishing. Pages 184–90 consider structured and unstructured observation, recording observational data, ethnographic observation and participant observation.

Williams, G.L. (1994) 'Observing and recording meetings', in N. Bennett, R. Glatter and R. Levačić (eds) *Improving Educational Management through Research and Consultancy*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing. Chapter 22 is thorough and helpful. Williams discusses content and process observations, decision-making processes and problem solving. He also includes several observation forms which may give you some ideas about how to design your own.