10.3 Qualitative research: observations

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Learning outcomes

- Evaluate participant, non-participant, naturalistic, overt, and covert observations
- Discuss considerations involved in setting up and carrying out an observation (e.g. audience effect, Hawthorne effect, disclosure)
- Discuss how researchers analyse data obtained in observational research

Introduction

In observations, the researcher enters a situation where some behaviour of interest is likely to take place and then make notes about it. The phenomenon of interest could be the nature and frequency of particular forms of behaviour, power relations in an organization, or the way people attribute meanings to gender roles.

If the researcher is to study power relations in a group of people, he or she makes systematic observations of the behaviour of the group in order to understand what it means to be a member of that particular group. The job of the researcher is to provide accounts of the observation on different levels of interaction, in order to identify and explain social structures within the study group. The observations are sometimes combined with other methods (e.g. interviews) to provide comparative results (triangulation).

Observation is an important method of gathering data. The aim is to gather first-hand information in a naturally occurring situation. There are two basic methods of observation:

- **participant observation**, where the observer takes part in the situation being studied while doing the research
- **non-participant observation**, where the observer is not part of the situation being studied.

Participant observation

In participant observation, the researcher becomes part of the group he or she observes. The aim of this research strategy is to gain a close and intimate familiarity with a given area of interest—for example, a religious group or a street gang—through personal involvement with people in their natural environment. The purpose is to develop a scientific understanding of the group.

In participant observational research, the researcher observes, listens, participates, and produces field notes. It is a very demanding task. Researchers must spend a great deal of time in surroundings that may not be familiar (e.g. prisons or hospitals); they must initiate and maintain relationships with people they may or may not like

Did you know?

The observational method is sometimes called **ethnography** because it uses the same method—fieldwork—as ethnographers and social anthropologists. This method originated in social anthropology. Fieldwork can be described as active participation in a group's life in order to gain information about how the group behaves and how social life is organized. By living with the people they were studying, anthropologists were able to give an inside account of their lives and generate new knowledge of the culture being studied. A famous example of fieldwork is Margaret Mead's work on adolescent girls on the island of Samoa in the 1930s.

(e.g. criminals); they must take a lot of notes on whatever happens (e.g. what people do, their body language, and their speech patterns); and they may run certain risks during the course of their work (e.g. injury at work if they are working in a factory). After the fieldwork is complete, the researchers spend many months analysing field notes and diaries before they write their research report.

Participant observation has been used in psychological research for some time—for example, in studies of urban communities, abused women in shelters, drug addicts, and professional thieves. It has proved to be a valuable method to gain insight into the lives and beliefs of subcultures. The researchers record their own experiences in the field in order to understand the universe of the participants in the study, and they use these experiences for scientific analysis by placing their field notes within a theoretical framework in order to explain the data. One example of participant observation is Festinger et al. (1956) on a cult. Festinger used participant observation to test an existing theory—cognitive dissonance.

Some researchers question whether traditional participant observations truly provide insight into people's minds. However, most qualitative researchers suggest that this can be done by active participation in a group's life over a period of time, without having any preconceived ideas. Some researchers believe that you can only truly understand people's world views if you base your work on the way people understand the world themselves. People's "theories of the world" are grounded in their daily interactions and communications. In order to discover these theories of the world, the researcher should look for regularities and patterns in the data to eventually discover the "rules" and "beliefs" that influence people.

The researcher is very important in that he or she is the *instrument* of data collection. The researcher enters the social world of other people, but they also affect the researcher in certain ways. It is important that the researcher is aware of this and that *continuous reflections* become part of the interpretation of the data. Critical thinking like this is always important, but particularly when the researcher chooses to study a group (e.g. an ethnic minority) in which he or she has a personal or political engagement. In the analysis, the researcher includes this and any other relevant biographical data because this is an important perspective in the interpretation of the data. This is an example of *reflexivity*.

Strengths of participant observation

- Combines the emic dimension (subjective participant perspective) with the etic dimension (objective observer perspective).
- Provides very detailed and in-depth knowledge of a topic, which cannot be gained by other methods.
- One of the best methods to avoid researcher bias because the researchers seek to understand how and why the social processes are the way they are, instead of imposing their own reality on the phenomenon.
- Provides a holistic interpretation of a topic, because the researcher takes into account as many aspects as possible of that

particular group of people, in order to synthesize observations into a whole. The researcher uses material from the participants themselves to generate "theory", and tries to explain one set of observations in terms of its relationship with others.

Limitations of participant observation

- Difficult to record data promptly and objectively.
- Time-consuming and demanding. The researcher needs to be physically present and try to live the life of the people he or she is studying. This takes time—as does data analysis—if the researcher is to arrive at an account that is reasonably objective and contextually sensitive. This is not possible in short-term projects.
- Risk that researchers lose objectivity. Researchers are supposed to immerse themselves, or "go native"—that is, be able to see the world from the point of the view of the participants. This may present problems in terms of objectivity. In participant observation there is a delicate balance between involvement and detachment.

Be a researcher

Which of the following observational methods would be the best to study?

- How teachers use feedback to encourage students.
- How students interact with each other during class projects.
- How students use the Internet to search for information.

Give reasons for your answers.

Non-participant observation

Non-participant observation means that the researcher is not part of the group being studied. It is a research technique by which the researcher observes participants, with or without their knowledge. The researcher does *not* take an active part in the situation as in participant observation. One example of non-participant observation could be a researcher studying gender differences in teacher feedback in a school class. Critics of this method argue that people who are observed do not behave naturally. This is called "reactivity", and it is assumed that reactivity will invalidate the data. Some observational research takes place in psychological laboratories—for example, through one-way mirrors. It is believed that this kind of observation does not really reflect what people do in real life, but it may be useful to conduct research in this way all the same because it is easier and faster to gather data by this method.

Deception is sometimes used in non-participant observation, because some information cannot be obtained if participants know they are being studied. However, it is essential that the researcher always respects the individual's privacy and the rule of confidentiality in such research.

Naturalistic observation

Naturalistic observation simply means that the observation takes place in the participants' natural environment, and that the researchers avoid interfering with the behaviour they are observing. The most important thing in naturalistic observations is that the researcher should not interfere with the naturally occurring behaviour. If the researcher spends some time with the participants before the observation begins, they will get used to his or her presence. The researcher could also use cameras to film behaviour—for example, in a playground—and then use this for analysis. If cameras are present for a long period, they will probably not interfere with natural behaviour.

If a psychologist wants to know how small children experience the world, he or she could spend time in a kindergarten observing the children. Kampman (1998) studied how children in kindergartens developed friendships with other children. He spent six months in an institution observing the children, and found that they show an interest in other children from a very early age. He argues, on the basis of his observation, that it is important that the institutions and parents help children to develop friendships because it strengthens social competency and trains them to resolve conflicts.

In *unstructured observations*, the researcher will record all relevant behaviour. There is no checklist. The behaviour to be studied is unpredictable. Data collection and analysis are difficult.

In *semi-structured observations*, data collection is not constrained by predetermined categories of analysis, but the researcher has decided what overall areas to look for. Data collection is easier and this approach allows for analysis at a greater level of depth and detail.

In *structured observations*, the researcher will record specific predetermined features of behaviour, using a checklist that has been developed before the observation. Data collection is easier, but data analysis is restricted to the preset categories. This may not reflect what really happens.

Strengths of naturalistic observation

- Ecological validity: the collection of data takes place in a natural environment and it is assumed that the participants behave in natural ways (in contrast to research in laboratories).
- Can be used to collect data in cases where it would be impossible or unethical to do so otherwise—for example, research on people with Alzheimer's disease.

Limitations of naturalistic observation

- There is the risk that people do react to being observed—that is, there may be *reactivity* involved.
- If the researcher collects the data alone, there may be problems in checking the data. However, multiple observers in the same field can compare data to ensure match of the data (sometimes called inter-observer reliability). The researcher can also document the fieldwork extensively and explain how he or she arrived at the conclusions reached, in order to promote credibility.
- Ethical considerations concerning the appropriateness of observing strangers without their knowledge. The researcher should also be aware not to violate the privacy of participants.

Overt and covert observation

Participant and non-participant observations can be overt or covert. The researcher decides in advance which technique is most appropriate for the research. There are strengths and limitations of both approaches.

Be a researcher

Plan a trip to a location (e.g. the zoo, a supermarket, a bus stop) and decide whom or what to observe. Then consider the following: should you make a detailed plan of what to observe before you start (structured observation) or would you prefer one of the other observational methods? Give a reasoned answer.

In an **overt observation**, the participants know they are being observed. This is the main strength in terms of ethical considerations. They may or may not have given formal consent, depending on the research. This depends on the degree of involvement of the researcher. Whatever the circumstances, the researcher will let the participants know that he or she is a researcher, but it is not always clear to them what the purpose of the study is. A researcher studying a group of women in a women's shelter might simply say that she is writing a book on domestic violence and how women cope with it. This may be enough to gain acceptance for the project. However, there will always be some kind of involvement because it is important that the researcher has a good relationship with the participants. The quality of the data depends on that. In overt participant observations where the psychologist actively participates in the group being studied, the participants are informed about the research and give informed consent.

In a **covert observation**, the participants are not aware of being studied, so they have not agreed to it. The participant has to "make up a story" to justify his or her presence in the setting in order to mask his or her real purpose in being there. This method has been used over the years in settings where it would otherwise be difficult to gain access, or when it is important that the presence of the researcher does not affect the behaviour of the people in the study. There are ethical issues involved in covert observations. First, is the fact that the participants have not been asked. Second, it can be dangerous for the researcher if he or she is investigating a group of people who are known to be violent, such as street gangs.

Ethics in research

1. Was the use of covert participant observation justified in Festinger's study? Why or why not?
2. Would it be possible for the public to recognize the participants in this study?
3. What ethical rules should the researcher always consider in covert observations?

Research in psychology

Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (1956)

One famous case study using covert participant observation was the investigation of a cult by Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter. The researchers wanted to find out how people in a cult would cope with the situation when their prophecies failed. They joined a cult that believed the world was scheduled to end on a specific date, and they got to know the cult members. Because of this, they were able to talk with the members and see how their beliefs changed when the world did not end.

The social psychologist Leon Festinger read a newspaper article about a religious cult that claimed to be receiving messages from outer space, predicting that a great flood would end the world. Festinger and some co-workers joined the group and pretended they were converts to the beliefs of the cult. The members of the cult believed they were going to be rescued by a flying saucer when the rest of the world was destroyed. The cult members had publicized the prophecies, and some of the members had sold their houses and given up their jobs. The researchers wanted to see what happened to the cult members when the world did not go under. The theory of cognitive dissonance predicted that the cult members would either change their beliefs to restore balance in their cognitions, or that they would change their behaviour to fit their beliefs. When the date arrived and there was no flood, some of the group members coped with it by saying that their prayers had saved the city. In this way, they created meaning from what had happened and there was balance in their cognitions. Other members simply left the cult. This indicated that they had changed their beliefs. The study confirmed the theory of cognitive dissonance.

Considerations involved in setting up and carrying out an observation

An observation is not just about "hanging around". A researcher who decides to carry out an observation must prepare it carefully.

Preparation of observation

The researcher needs to find out about the problem under investigation and set up a plan for the observations—for example, contact people and make the necessary arrangements. The researcher should also decide whether to conduct a participant or a non-participant observation. It is also a good idea to decide exactly what to focus on in the field, while leaving space for flexibility. It may be a good idea that the researcher becomes familiar with the setting and the people before starting the observations. This could reduce some of the problems of having a stranger in the setting.

The researcher must take some initial decisions as to the purpose of the research and what kind of notes to make during observations.

- Descriptive? The researcher just observes what is happening and does not make any inferences.
- Inferential? The researcher makes inferences about what is observed, including comments on individual reactions and expressions of emotion.
- Evaluative? The researcher makes inferences and evaluates the behaviour—for example, if expressions of self-hate in a minority group are evidence of power relationships in the wider society.

Researchers should also be aware of their own position—for example, feminist or political in relation to the subject area—because this needs to be clear in relation to the reflections conducted during the research. The researcher's perspective may well influence his or her interpretation of the situation, and this is acceptable in qualitative research as long as it is declared openly.

Classroom research 1

If a researcher wants to undertake observations in a classroom, he or she could conduct pre-observational interviews with the participants (teachers and students). The participants should also be briefed about the purpose of the research and what is going to occur during the observations. The researcher could present the purpose of the research, but some of it may not be revealed—for example, the purpose could be said to be how teachers and students interact in the classroom, but not that the researcher is interested in how this affects the students' motivation and interest, or whether gender and ethnicity influence teacher feedback. The contacts with participants before the observation can reduce the risk that they will behave in ways that are not natural when the observation takes place. Participant expectancy (reactivity) is minimized.

Conducting the observation

The researcher meets with the participants and establishes a rapport. This may involve a "culture shock" and adjustment to the context,

especially in cases of participant observation. The researcher must be aware of ethical rules of conduct.

In participant observations, it is important to be involved in the setting and with the people, while staying analytical. The goal is to preserve researcher "objectivity", so that the data collection is not influenced by selective perception. It may be an advantage that several observers work at the same time, or the researcher might use independent observers. The advantage is that one observer might notice what another has missed. Furthermore, it allows the researcher to become aware of the amount of agreement between the observers.

There is always the risk that participants do not behave naturally. This is called participant expectancy (or reactivity). It can be a problem whenever people are being observed. The researcher may come to the investigation with an in-built bias (researcher bias or the Rosenthal effect), which may result in selective perceptions and a biased interpretation of the data. Both factors may influence the credibility (validity) of the data, because the behaviour of the observed persons may be untypical of their normal behaviour—that is, it lacks ecological validity. This can be counterbalanced by credibility checks.

The field notes must be rich, thick, descriptive, and very detailed at all stages of the observation. The notes should include a variety of information from several perspectives.

Classroom research 2

While undertaking observations, the researcher should provide a highly detailed description of the interactions in the classroom in relation to each of the areas of interest. This might be how the teacher gives feedback to individual children (e.g. in relation to gender or minority groups); how the children react to the teacher (e.g. facial and verbal expressions); who is talking and who is not talking in the class; and if there is evidence that the students are learning anything. There should be notes for each focus area, and the notes should also include space to write reflections.

After the observations

After the observations, the researcher can conduct post-observational interviews, and the participants must be debriefed, unless the observations were covert. Data analysis is then carried out—for example, using grounded theory based on field notes.

Classroom research 3

The observation notes (and perhaps video recordings of a couple of classes) must be analysed and synthesized. The researcher will include the information from the interviews conducted prior to and after the observations. He or she will probably also include information that can place the observations in context—for example, racism or gender inequality in the wider society.

Be reflective

A researcher wants to conduct a research study in a shelter for abused women to find out how and if they support each other.

- Which observational method would you recommend, and why?
- Why might it be important for the researcher to establish a rapport with the participants?
- What ethical considerations should the researcher observe in a study like this?

Analysis of data obtained in observational research

Qualitative researchers are concerned with the process as well as the end product of the research. They take an *inductive* approach to data analysis—that is, they begin to create a picture as they collect the data and examine them. The analysis is based on the researcher's field notes, but these are often compared to data from other sources (e.g. interview transcripts, pictures, narratives), as it is common in participant observation to use a variety of sources.

One way to analyse the data from observations is grounded theory analysis. Researchers using this method prepare their data—that is, having "thick" field notes. The core of grounded theory analysis is based on three related processes: **description**, and **coding and connecting themes** to **produce an account**.

Description

The first step in observations is to provide a complete description of the phenomenon of interest. The description includes the context of the action, the intentions of the actor, and the process in which the action is embedded (Denzin 1978). A "thick" description provides rich data.

Coding and connecting themes

The coding of the data means that they are organized into categories. This is an important part of qualitative analysis. The purpose is to provide tools for analysis. Without categorization, it is not possible to know *what* is analysed and it is not possible to compare the data.

The classification process consists of reading and rereading the field notes in an interactive way. The researcher must be able to identify bits of data and create categories, by asking questions like who? what? when? where? why? The researcher can create graphical representations of the categories and their connections, and supply case examples. This approach can open different routes to examine the data and makes it easier to see how the categories and subcategories may be related by themes. The researcher should write a summary of the analysis so that independent readers can follow how and why the connections are reached. These notes about notes are called **memos**.

When the data have been classified into themes, the researcher can look for higher-order themes (main themes) and subthemes. The interpretation of the data is based on comparison of the collected data, and sometimes the researcher will include evidence from other sources—for example, interview data or information on the social context. It is important to think critically and not only look for data that *support* the interpretation. The researcher should also search for evidence that could contradict the interpretation. Critical thinking means looking for alternative explanations.

Producing an account

The end product is a written account based on all the elements of the analysis. The researcher produces a coherent explanation and an overall theoretical framework for understanding the phenomenon

under investigation. The theoretical framework is "grounded"—that is, it is based on the categories identified during the observation. However, it may also be that researchers use theoretical triangulation—that is, including alternative theories to explain the phenomenon. (For more on triangulation, see Chapter 10.1.) The researcher continuously consults the data to see if they support the interpretation. He or she may also consult the participants, to ask them whether they can support the interpretation. Finally, he or she can ask other researchers to take a critical look at the account and the data to see whether they can support them. The important thing is that the researcher makes it possible for the reader to track and verify how the conclusion is reached.

There are issues of generalization from an observational study. According to some researchers, it is possible to make inferential and theoretical generalizations. (For more about this, see Chapter 10.1.)

Be a researcher

You have been asked to conduct observational research to study bullying in a school.

1. Describe how you could set up and execute such a project, using your knowledge.
2. How would you record the data and prepare them for analysis? Why?
3. What would be the ethical considerations to take into account?