**8. Collecting Primary Data Through Observation**

If your research question(s) and objectives are about what people do, an obvious way in which to discover this is to watch them do it. This is essentially what observation involves:

the systematic observation, recording, description, analysis and interpretation of people’s behaviour. There is no questioning or communicating with people.

There are two types of observation:

1. Participant observation which is a qualitative approach of discovering the meanings that

people attach to their actions. This involves the researcher participating in the activities of

the people.

2. Structured observation which is a quantitative approach and is more concerned with the

frequency of those actions.

**Participant Observation (a qualitative approach)**

The researcher attempts to participate fully in the lives and activities of subjects and becomes a member of that group, organisation or community. This enables the researcher to share their experiences by not merely observing what is happening but also feeling it. It is not possible in many instances to understand the behaviour of people, and participant observation then serves the purpose to discover those delicate nuances of meaning. (Nuance = a very slight difference in meaning.) This implies that participant observation can help a researcher to get a more meaningful understanding of the human interactions in a group, organisation or community. It is attempting to find the meaning behind an interaction between or among the people.

**Situations in which participant observation has been used**

Whyte (1995) lived among a poor American-Italian community and he used participant observation to understand the behavioural pattern of this ‘street corner society’.

Roy (1952) worked in a machine shop for 10 months as an employee. He wanted to understand how and why his ‘fellow workers’ operated the piecework bonus system.

Rosen (1991) worked as a participant observer in a Philadelphia advertising agency. He wanted to understand how organisations used social drama to create and sustain power relationships and social structures.

**Researcher Roles in Participant Observation**

There are four roles identified by Gill and Johnson (1997):

1. Complete participant The identity of the researcher
2. Complete observer is not revealed.
3. Observer as participant The identity of the researcher
4. Participant as observer is revealed.

The first two of these roles, the complete participant and complete observer, the researcher’s identity is not revealed. This is to overcome the problem of the research subjects putting up a different behaviour or not really want to cooperate with you in your research.

The second two, observer as participant and participant as observer, entail the researcher revealing his purpose to those with whom he is mixing in the research setting.

**Complete Participant Role**

The researcher attempts to become a member of the group in which he is performing research. His identity is not revealed to enable him to discover the true meaning of the group member behaviour in order to obtain answers to the research questions and to attain the research objectives.

There may a question of ethics. The researcher might be accused of spying on people who have become his friends as well as colleagues. They may learn to trust him with information that they would not share were they to know his true purpose. The researcher has to avoid such a situation and not to lose sight of his research purpose.

**Complete Observer Role**

Here the researcher does not take part in the activities of the group. E.g. you may be a customer in a supermarket, but you act as a complete observer to study the behaviour of other customers in the supermarket.

**Observer as Participant Role**

You may act as an observer in a team building course you attended. Your identity as a researcher is clear to all concerned.

**Participant as Observer Role**

The identity of the researcher is made known to the members concerned in the research setting. This approach is useful in a situation for assessing the experience of the participants such as a fieldwork relationship. The revelation is necessary to gain the trust of the members.

E.g.

Your research project is concerned with you wishing to understand what the experience of a one-day assessment centre is like for the graduates who attend these as prospective employees.

You decide that there is no better way of doing this than ‘getting in on the action’ and being a guinea pig. You negotiate access with the company managers who are running the assessment centre. You also explain your research to the graduates who are there ‘for real’. You become involved in all the activities and speak to as many of your fellow graduates as possible in order to discover their feelings about the experience. At the end of the day you are utterly exhausted!

**Factors that may determine the choice of participant observer role**

1. The purpose of your research.
2. The time you have to devote to your research.
3. The degree to which you feel suited to participant observation.

Not everyone is suited to this type of research. It relies very much on building relationships with others and a certain amount of personal flexibility is required. As a participant observer you have to be ‘all things to all people’. Your own personality must be suppressed to a greater extent. This is not something with which you may feel comfortable.

1. Organisational access.
2. Ethical considerations

**Data collection and analysis in participant observation**

The data generated by participant observation may be:

1. Primary observations - statements where you would note what happened or what was said at the time. Keeping a diary is a good way of doing this.
2. Secondary observations - are statements by observers of what happened or was said. These are observers’ interpretations.
3. Experiential data - data from your perceptions and feelings as you experience the process you are researching. Keeping a diary of these perceptions and feelings proves a valuable source of data when the time comes to write up your research.
4. Collect data on factors material to the research setting for example, roles played by key participants and how they may have changed, organisational structures and communication patterns.

**Data collection**

The data collected are those that could not be obtained at the interview. Questioning and observation can come together. First you can ask the informant to clarify the situations you have observed and second to yourself to clarify the situation and the accounts given of the situations which you have observed earlier.

The data in qualitative research is basically descriptive in nature classified as ‘descriptive observation’ and ‘narrative account’.

In descriptive observation you may concentrate on observing the physical setting, the key participants and their activities, particular events and their sequence and the attendant processes and emotions involved. This description may be the basis for your writing of a narrative account. You have to go on and develop a framework of theory that will help you to understand and to explain to others what is going on in the research setting you are studying.

How you record your data is important. You must be ‘open’ to more possibilities so that you are able to make more notes at the time the events is being observed or reported. One golden rule is: recording must take place on the same day as the fieldwork in order that you do not forget valuable data.

**Data analysis**

In participant observation research your data collection and analysis activity may be part of the same process. This means you will be carrying out analysis and collection of data simultaneously. From the analysis you may come up with ‘promising lines of enquiry’ that you might want to follow up in your continued observation. At the end of the analysis of the data collected you should be able to come out with a theory to help you to understand ‘what is going on’. This approach is known as analytic induction.

**Threats to reliability and validity**

Participant observation is very high on ecological validity because it involves studying social phenomena in their natural environment. It is also subjected to threats of validity because of the situations in which the research is done being specific circumstances and conditions. As a consequence, there is little generalizability.

The threat of reliability could come from the observer bias. It is difficult to avoid such bias but should try to minimise it. This is because we have our own perceptions to colour our interpretation of what we believe to be true.

One possible way is to use triangulation to improve the reliability of the conclusions reached. Information for triangulation can come from the data collected from interviews and questionnaires from the participants.

**Advantages and Disadvantages of participant observation**

Advantages

1. It is good at explaining ‘what is going on’ in particular social situation.
2. It heightens the researcher’s awareness of significant social processes.
3. It is particularly useful for researchers working within their own organisations.
4. Some participant observation affords the opportunity for the researcher to experience ‘for real’ the emotions of those who are being researched.
5. Virtually all data collected are useful.

Disadvantages

1. It can be very time consuming.
2. It can pose difficult ethical dilemmas for the researcher.
3. There can be high levels of role conflict for the researcher (e.g. colleagues versus researcher).
4. The closeness of the researcher to the situation being observed can lead to significant observer bias.
5. The participant observer role is a very demanding one, to which not all researchers will be suited.
6. Access to organisations may be difficult.
7. Data recording is often very difficult for the researcher.

**Structured Observation (quantitative approach)**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Differences between Unstructured Observation and Structured Observation | |
| Unstructured Observation | Structured Observation |
| 1. Does not have a predetermined structure.  2. Answers to the questions and objectives  come from observing the activities of the  participants.  3. Researchers can get attached to the  research setting.  4. Researchers’ findings depend on the  responsiveness of the participants.  5. Results of the findings may not be  generalised. | 1. Systematic approach to observation and with a predetermined structure.  2. Data collection is based on quantitative  aspect such as frequency of occurrence. |

**Situations in which structured observation may be used**

It is like a ‘time and motion’ study such as in the production areas or the study of how managers go about planning, leading and controlling activities in a certain period of time.

**Advantages and Disadvantages**

Advantages

1. It can be used by anyone after suitable training in the use of the measuring instrument. Therefore you can delegate this extremely time-consuming task. In addition, structured observation may be carried out simultaneously in different locations. This would present the opportunity of comparison between locations.
2. It should yield highly reliable results by virtue of its replicability.
3. Structured observation is capable of more than simply observing the frequency of events. It is also possible to record the relationship between events. For example, is the visit to the retail chemist’s counter to present a prescription preceded by an examination of merchandise unrelated to the prescription transaction?
4. The method allows the collection of data at the time they occur in their natural setting. therefore there is no need to depend on ‘second-hand’ accounts of phenomena from respondents who put their own interpretation on events.
5. Structured observation secures information that most participants would ignore because to them it was too mundane or irrelevant.

**Disadvantages of structured observation**

1. The observer must be in the research setting when the phenomena under study are taking place.
2. Research results are limited to overt action or surface indicators form which the observer must make inferences.
3. Data are slow and expensive to collect.

**Data collection and analysis in structured observation**

Before you start the structured observation, you have to decide to use an ‘off the shelf’ coding schedule (like a standard format) or develop your own coding schedule.

E.g. an ‘off-the-shelf’ coding schedule: Recording sheet for observing behaviour in groups

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Name of group:  Nature of activity:  Date: Name of observer:  Initial arrangement of group:  C D  B E  A F | | | | | | |
| Name of group members (or reference letters) | | | | | | |
|  | A | B | C | D | E | F |
| Taking initiative - e.g. attempted leadership, seeking suggestions, offering direction |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Brainstorming - e.g. offering ideas or suggestion, however valid. |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Offering positive ideas - e.g. making helpful suggestions, attempting to problem-solving |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Drawing in others - e.g. encouraging contributions, seeking ideas and opinions |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Being responsive to others - e.g. giving encouragement and support, building on ideas |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Harmonising - e.g. acting as peacemaker, calming things down, compromising |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Challenging - e.g. seeking justification, showing disagreement in a constructive way |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Being obstructive - e.g. criticising, putting others down, blocking contribution |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Clarifying/summarising - e.g. linking ideas, checking progress, clarifying objectives or proposals |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Performing group roles - e.g. spokesperson, recorder, time-keeper, humourist |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Other comments |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Guidelines for developing your own coding schedule

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Attribute | Comments |
| Focused | Do not observe and record all that is going on. Concern yourself only with what is strictly relevant |
| Unambiguous | Therefore requiring the absolute minimum of observer interpretation |
| Non-context dependent | The observer’s job is more difficult if the coding of behaviours is dependent o the context in which the behaviour occurs. It may be essential for your research question(s) and objectives to record contextual data, but this should be kept to a minimum |
| Explicitly defined | Provide examples for the observer (even if this is you) of behaviours that fall into each category and those that do not |
| Exhaustible | Ensure that it is always possible to make a coding for those behaviours you wish to observe |
| Mutually exclusive | Ensure that there is no overlap between behaviour categories |
| Easy to record | The observer must be able to tick the correct box quickly without having to memorise appropriate categories |

**Data Analysis**

How complex is your analysis of the data will depend on your research question(s) and objectives. If you used for example the off-the -shelf schedule as shown above to record you observations, you can establish the amount of interactions by category in order to relate the results to the output of the meeting.

Alternatively you may use the above schedule to see what patterns emerge. It may be that the amount of interactions varies by the nature of the group or its activity or that seating position is associated with the amount of contributions.

Threats to validity and reliability

The main threats are ones of reliability such as:

1. Subject error - it may cause the data to be unreliable. This is dependent on who has been chosen for the research study.
2. Time error - this may be due to the fact that the time at which you conduct the observation does not provide data that are not typical of the total time period in which you are interested. A different output result occurred.
3. Observer effect - this is the result of a change in the behaviour of the participant you were observing especially when the subject becomes aware of being observed.

Questions

1. What are the two types of observation you can use to obtain primary data?

2. For qualitative research what type of observation would be more appropriate and why is it

so?

3. What types of role a researcher can play in unstructured observation to gather the research

data?

4. Explain why generalizability of the findings in unstructured observation is difficult to

apply to the population.

5. What are the differences between unstructured observation and structured observation?

6. What are the possible threats to the reliability and validity faced by participant

observation?