

AND ONE THING YOU MIGHT WANT TO CONSIDER SAYING...

To your interviewee when you are sensing 'wariness':

- 'Would you feel more comfortable if I turned it off and just took notes?'

A note on translators

Finally, a quick note on translators. If you need to use a translator, there are a number of issues you will need to consider in the quest for credible data. First, you need to make sure your translator is experienced. Just being bilingual doesn't guarantee the necessary skills – be sure to trial and/or seek references. You then need to decide how you will use the translator. Will you ask them to translate your questions literally, or would you like them to use their own judgement in an attempt to convey your meaning? Will they translate for the interviewee during the interview, or will you tape the interviewee in their native language and have the translator transcribe into English at a later time? You also need to think through issues of structure and formality. Gaining casual rapport or being highly flexible can be tough to do through a translator. There are no easy answers here, and perhaps the best advice is that you definitely need to have a run through. This is probably the only way to assess whether your translation process is going to work for you.

OBSERVATION

Observation is a word we might use on any given day, in any multitude of situations. In day-to-day language, *to observe* means 'to watch or notice', while *observation* refers to 'the act of watching or noticing'. The problem is that these day-to-day definitions cannot be directly transferred to the world of research methods. As a methods term, 'observation' needs to be identified as a systematic methodology; while the term 'observe' needs to connote more than input from just visual cues.

Observation: A systematic method of data collection that relies on a researcher's ability to gather data through his or her senses.

Observe: To notice, using a full range of appropriate senses. To see, hear, feel, taste, and smell.

What you see isn't always what you get

Because students are often familiar with the general concept of observation, they tend to think that conducting an observational study will be pretty straightforward.

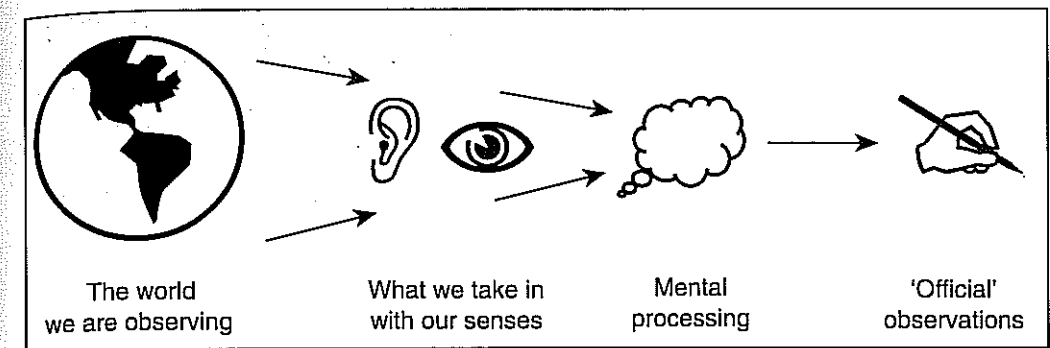


FIGURE 11.1 FILTERING OBSERVATIONS

They will simply observe and take note of what is happening in a given situation or context. What I try to stress to these students is that observation needs to be considered a systematic data collection method. The challenge is taking something done on a daily basis and converting it into a rigorous research tool. This can be quite difficult because observation requires that researchers continually consider and negotiate how their own inherent biases might: (1) colour their observations; and (2) have a potential impact on the observed.

You and you alone

A major obstacle in the quest for credible data through observation is the way in which your own history, biases, interests, experiences, and expectations can colour what you observe. As highlighted in Figure 11.1, a world exists that we observe. That world is narrowed by what we can manage to take in of it through our senses. Sensory input is then filtered and processed by a brain that has been socialized into thinking and understanding through very structured, defined, and indeed limited frameworks. Finally, our constructed understandings are condensed into our official observations. This process puts a lot of responsibility for the generation of credible data squarely on the thought processes of the researcher, and highlights the need for observational studies to be systematically planned and, if possible, confirmed through the use of other methods.

You and them

Do people ever act the same when they know they are being observed? What are the ethics of observing people without telling them? Are there any potential threats posed to researchers who immerse themselves into the cultures they are observing? The respective answers to these questions are not really, highly suspect, and lots. The more entwined you become with the researched, the more difficult it is to navigate the process. Box 11.8 gives a nice example of the difficulties researchers can face when they observe without reflexive consideration of their own impact and positioning.

Box 11.8 Come for Miles, Will They? – Timothy's Story

I remember a documentary I saw in an anthropology class where researchers were conducting an observational study of a small community somewhere in South America. They were filming an old woman that they described as a local 'guru', and decided to film her doing her 'Sunday ritual'. This was the first time the researchers had been to this event and talked about how far people were coming just to see this woman. I watched this film and thought ... 'Hold on, what if these people are coming here to see you. You know, white people with cameras, lights, and sound booms'. My suspicions became even greater when the camera briefly panned on a couple of laughing children trying to pat the big fuzzy microphone. The researchers never mentioned the potential impact they had on what they were observing, and ended up attributing all they observed to the local context.

From objectivity to immersion

A common feature of all observational studies is that they attempt to document what people actually do, rather than what they say they do. Observational studies rely on actual behaviour. But of course, how natural those behaviours are can depend on the role of the observer and the nature of the observational study.

In conducting observations, researchers can be anything from removed to immersed:

Non-participant: In this role, researchers do not become, or aim to become, an integral part of the system or community they are observing. This may involve watching interactions through a one-way mirror, sitting in the corner of a room observing a meeting, or hanging out in the local park. Observers are physically present but attempt to be unobtrusive. Non-participant observation tends to occur over a fixed time period and is often aligned with a structured format.

Participant: In this role, researchers are, or become, a part of the team, community, or cultural group they are observing. They may be part of a workforce, they may live in a particular community, they may join the church, etc. The goal is to attempt to preserve a natural setting and to gain cultural empathy by experiencing phenomena and events from the perspective of those observed. Participant observation can involve large time and emotional commitments, and is often aligned with a less structured, often ethnographic, process.

It is important to note, however, that these roles are not necessarily discreet and often overlap, which can cause difficulties for the researcher. For example, when non-participant observers begin to participate, they can influence and contaminate their research settings. On the other hand, observation is still the goal of the 'participant', and the more immersed the participant becomes, the harder it may be to maintain the role of researcher.

In conducting observations, researchers also need to carefully consider the advantages and disadvantages of full disclosure:

Candid: With candid observations, researchers offer full disclosure of the nature of their study; the role the observations will play in their research; and what they might expect to find through the observation process. This allows observers to take notes on site, but it can also create an uncomfortable situation where the observed feels under surveillance, and is therefore less likely to act naturally. Nevertheless, full disclosure is often an ethics requirement.

Covert: Covert observation can be non-participant, i.e. watching pedestrian behaviour at an intersection or watching interactions at a school playground. In these types of observational study, interaction between the observer and the observed is minimal and there is often an attempt to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of those observed.

Covert studies can also be participant. This involves researchers going 'undercover' in an attempt to get a real sense of a situation, context, or phenomenon. Observers may be outsiders who attempt to become insiders, or they can be insiders who decide to study their own. This type of covert observation can be necessary when attempting to study fringe, marginal, or illegal groups/activities, i.e. biker gangs, cults, or cockfights. While the naturalness of the setting is maintained and the ability to develop trust and rapport is maximized, participant covert studies can be highly problematic. First, observers may find themselves immersed in a culture that may be dangerous; they may feel pressured to become involved in immoral/illegal activities. Second, as observers become immersed in the group, they may have difficulty maintaining the covert nature of their activities, or may feel guilty about their deception. Third, observers must eventually leave the setting and report findings, which may take its own emotional toll. Finally, for all the above reasons, getting ethics approval for covert participant observation can be highly problematic.

Finally, as with interviewing, observational techniques can range from highly structured to unstructured. Keep in mind, however, that irrespective of the level of structure, observation of any sort demands systematic planning.

Structured: Structured observational studies can collect both qualitative and quantitative data; are highly systematic; and often rely on predetermined criteria related to the people, events, practices, issues, behaviours, actions, situations, and phenomena being observed. Checklists or observation schedules are prepared in advance and researchers attempt to be objective, neutral, and removed with a goal of minimizing personal interaction.

Semi-structured: In semi-structured observations, observers generally use some manner of observation schedule or checklist to organize observations, but also attempt to observe and record the unplanned and/or the unexpected.

Unstructured: Unstructured observation involves observers attempting to observe and record data without predetermined criteria. Observers either attempt to record all of their observations and later search for emergent patterns, or they make judgement calls on the relevance of initial observations and attempt to focus subsequent observations and reflections on those areas deemed most significant.

The observation process

Observing as a social science method requires as much forethought and planning as any other data-gathering technique. Observation involves the need to plan for all issues and contingencies; observe the setting; record observations; review the process; refine as appropriate; and finally, analyze the data. Box 11.9 outlines the steps involved in observation. As was the case for surveying and interviewing, you may find this box helpful as both a guide and a checklist.

Box 11.9 Steps in the Observation Process

PLAN

1. Realistically consider access/acceptance to the group/situation/activities you wish to observe.
2. Familiarize yourself and plan for any potential language and/or cultural issues likely to affect the process.
3. Consider the presentation of self, including what role you will take and how involved you will be.
4. Decide approximately how long you think you will be observing and whether the process will be covert or candid.
5. Consider strategies for ensuring credibility (see Chapter 9, Box 9.1.)
6. Brainstorm preconceived ideas and expectations and also brainstorm alternatives.
7. Prepare an observation schedule/checklist or, if unstructured, consider any relevant themes to explore.
8. Seek ethics approval.

OBSERVE

9. Ease into the observation situation. If structured and candid, this will be similar to the opening stages of an interview where you need to be on time, set up and check any equipment, introduce the study, and establish rapport. If your study involves greater immersion into a culture, early stages will require you to sit back, listen, attempt to gain trust, and then establish rapport.
10. Use all your senses, and possibly your intuition, to gather data.
11. Because you will not be directing the process, you need to be prepared to invest significant time in your observations.
12. Look for saturation (your observations no longer yield new knowledge) before ending the process.

RECORD

13. Observations need to be recorded in a timely manner. If using schedules, they should be filled in while observations occur. If you are more immersed in your research context, you may want to record your observations when removed from the situation either on data sheets or in a journal. Your record may also include photographs and video/audio recordings.
14. Attempt to record your data in a systematic fashion that will ease future analysis.

REVIEW

15. Review the process and note any difficulties encountered, i.e. access, time taken, engagement, cultural 'ignorance', comfort zones, recording/note-taking, roles, objectivity, etc.
16. Review your observation records and note any difficulties you might encounter in making sense of your record.
17. See if you can confirm your record by checking with an insider, asking another observer to compare notes, or triangulating your observational data with other data types.

REFINE

18. Make modifications based on your own review of the process and the quality of the data generated.
19. Observation takes practice. Keep reviewing and refining until you are comfortable with the process and data collected.

ANALYZE DATA

20. Turn to Chapter 12 to work through data management and analysis!

Receiving, reflecting, recording, authenticating

As highlighted above, what sets observational methods apart from those of interviewing and surveying is that there is no tool used to generate particular responses from the observed. There are no 'questions'; it is simply the observed doing what they do, and observers taking that in, noting it, and making sense of it. While the perceived advantage is 'genuineness', the disadvantage is how complicated it can be for researchers to work through the process of receiving, reflecting, recording and authenticating their observations.

Receiving

We do not all take in or perceive the world in the same way. As outlined in Chapter 2, individuals can be predominately right-brained or left-brained. A right-brained individual is likely to hear music, see vivid images, and process the whole rather than the parts, i.e. see a park, while a left-brained person is likely to see sequences, be tuned into language, and process components, i.e. see a river, a swing, a grassy area.

Similarly, individuals can be identified by their predilection for a particular type of sensory input. Visual learners tend to gather data through sight; auditory learners gather data through hearing; while kinesthetic learners tend to gather data by moving, doing, and touching. It is, therefore, not only possible, but in fact likely, that two observers in the same situation will take in quite different sensory inputs.

This 'bias' has obvious implications for the credibility of data collected through observation. Within structured observations this can be controlled for by using observation schedules that require information gathered through a variety of senses. In less structured formats, it is important for observers to: be aware of their own learning styles (see Chapter 2); be conscious of the need to compensate for any 'weaker' areas; reflect on their observation process; critically assess the data they are collecting; and attempt to modify their techniques accordingly.

Reflecting

Once sensory data is taken in, the potential for bias continues. It is exceptionally difficult for researchers, particularly those who choose to immerse themselves within the research setting, to be objective. Our worldviews are embedded within us. We carry with us the biases and prejudices of both our attributes and our socialization. They are a part of how we understand and make sense of the world, and how we might go about observing it. And as discussed in Chapter 4, if we do not recognize and attempt to negotiate our subjectivities, our research will be imprinted with our own biases and assumptions. This can lead to observations that are interpreted through the perspective of the observer, rather than the observed; are insensitive to race, class, culture, or gender; have difficulty hearing marginalized voices; tend to dichotomize what is seen; and do not respect the power of language.

Another difficulty in unbiased reflecting is your own expectations. Put simply, you are more likely to see the things you expect to see, and hear the things you want to hear. It's like when you get a new car and you suddenly see that model everywhere you go; the cars were always there – you just never noticed them before. And I know that much of the feedback I give students is positive, but every bit of (constructive!) criticism seems to loom ten times larger in their brain. Before going out in the field, it is well worth consciously brainstorming your own expectations. You can then brainstorm a range of alternatives, so that you're less likely to unconsciously reflect on your observations in ways that find you confirming what you already suspect.

Recording

Your method of recording will vary depending on the level of participation, openness, and structure you will adopt in your observational processes. There are two quite different strategies for recording observations that somewhat overlap with strategies discussed in surveying and interviewing; and your study may see you adopt one or both of these methods:

- *The capture of raw data* – this can involve audio and video-recording, as well as still photography. The advantage here is that raw data is preserved for review

and use at a later date. The major disadvantages are that it can be seen as intrusive; equipment can be fallible; and costs can be high.

- *Note-taking/journaling* – content can range from purely descriptive and formal accounts of space, actors, acts, and events, to much more interpretative narrative accounts or 'thick descriptions' (see Chapter 9) that include goals, feelings, and underlying 'stories'. The form also varies and can range from coded schedules and quantitative tallying to stories, poems, pictures, concept maps, and jotted ideas.

Authenticating

For all of the reasons listed above, the question mark that looms over the credibility of observational data can be quite large. It is therefore particularly important to include credibility checks into your methodological plan. As covered in Chapter 9 (Box 9.1), ensuring credibility includes both thoroughness and confirmation. In relation to thoroughness, your observational method should involve broad representation, prolonged engagement, persistence, crystallization, saturation, peer/supervisor review of your process, and full explication of method. Strategies for confirmation include: informant/member checking and triangulation.

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

The final data collection method discussed in this chapter is document analysis. Now this can be a bit confusing on a number of counts. First, the term 'document' can refer to more than just paper, and can include photographs, works of art, and even television programmes. Often the word 'text' is used to represent this range of data. Second, document analysis refers to these 'texts' as a primary data source – or data in its own right. It does not refer to an overall review of literature as discussed in Chapter 6. Finally, document analysis refers to both a data collection method and a mode of analysis.

Document analysis: Collection, review, interrogation, and analysis of various forms of text as a primary source of research data.

The focus of this chapter is on the collection, review, and interrogation of documents, and does not cover analysis. Issues of analysis are covered in Chapter 12.

Going to the source

In document analysis, we are talking about documents as a source of data, similar to data gathered in surveys, interviews, and observations. This can take the form of previously gathered census data, newspaper articles, historical archives, or company minutes – the list goes on and on. The main point of distinction, however, is that the 'documents' are pre-produced texts that have not been generated by the researcher. Rather, the researcher's role is limited to gathering, reviewing, and interrogating relevant documents.