Observations

**Participant Observations**

Participant observations are used when first-hand information about people is needed

The researcher participates actively in the participant’s life, observes, listens and produces field notes. Participant can be as a co-worker, voluntary worker etc in order to describe beliefs and experiences of the participants (and their own theories of the world)

The researcher could include reflexivity in the research process to increase credibility, for example if own experiences influence choice of topic or how relationship with participants could influence data collection and interpretation

Characteristics:

* Researcher is part of the target group under investigation
* Researcher acts as the instrument of data collection
* Obtain a close & intimate familiarity/ empathy with Ps through personal involvement with people in their own environment
* Researcher needs professional & interpersonal skills to stay objective during process
* Focuses on natural behaviour in its natural context

Strengths

+ Detailed and in-depth information of a topic that other methods don’t have

+ Explore socially sensitive issues because researcher takes many different aspects of a topic

+ Avoid researcher bias because the aim is to understand social processes from the perspective of participants

Limitations

* Small group, difficult to generalize findings
* Highly invasive, influence people’s lives and environment
* Lose objectivity in researcher. Difficult to keep balance between involvement and detachment. Reflectivity can increase credibility.
* Data collection and analysis is very time consuming

**Non-participant Observations**

The researcher **does not take part** in the participants’ life or interactions

Strength of non-participant observation

- It is easier to collect data because researcher does not interact with participants

- researcher only observes natural behavior

- useful way of observing behavior of small groups

- useful of observing interactions between individuals

- **observational data can be cross-checked to establish credibility**

Limitations of non-participant observation

- there is a risk that the presence of the researcher influences data (reactivity)

- deception may be necessary to avoid reactivity

- artificiality, difficult to know that natural behavior is true, esp when in laboratory

- coding of observational data can be difficult if it is not a structured observation

- analysis is time consuming, costly

**Naturalistic observations**

Naturalistic observation occurs in a natural setting and focuses on context and natural behavior.

·      They are more likely to be highly ecologically valid.

·      It can be combined with controlled observations as well as interviews and questionnaires to form stronger credible data (triangulation)

o   In lab settings, researcher is not interested in forced behavior (eg they will record natural behavior in a laboratory, unnatural, setting)

·      Researchers often have to spend a long time in the field to become familiar with participants and the environment.

·      The researcher will collect data to write field notes used for analysis.

·      Strengths

o   Increased ecological validity because natural behavior and natural environment

o   Can be combined with lab observations and data from other qualitative methods

·      Limitations

o   Ethical issues if it is covert

o   Analysis of data can be time consuming

o   Experiments may be costly

·      Good example of naturalistic observation exp – Bullying of high school kids.

**Overt and Covert**

OVERT

Participants know they participate in research

**Strengths**

Participants can be informed about the topic and give informed consent

Data collection can be triangulated with interview data.

**Limitations**

The researcher may lose objectivity and become too involved.

The researcher’s presence is a potential source of bias (reactivity)

Examples

* Observing participant reaction to extreme heights.
* Participants may be tested for memory.

COVERT

Participants do not know they participate in the research

**Strengths**

It is possible to stuffy groups that cannot be studied otherwise; or when it is vital to avoid reactivity

There is limited or no reactivity since participants don’t know about the research

**Weaknesses**

Participants are not informed about the research and cannot give informed consent.

It can be dangerous if participants find out about the study.

Examples

* Trying to research on gang behavior.
* Studying reactions to natural disasters