Observation – Structured and Participant

Structured observation

Observation involves watching people in some situation and making a record of what you have seen. As used in research, two very different styles are widely used. In structured observation, commonly used in studies of animal behaviour, an observation schedule is devised. This requires the observer to make decisions about how to categorize what she sees. Typically, there is a fixed set of possible alternative categories. Substantial training of observers is needed before such a schedule can be used reliably.

The situation is very similar to the use of tests as a research instrument. While there are many published observation schedules, it is rare to find one that does exactly the job that you want done. Devising your own is a very difficult task. It is actually rather worse than with tests as, even if you find an existing observation schedule that is just right, you are still faced with a lengthy training period before you can use it reliably. To demonstrate that you are using it reliably you have to get a colleague or other researcher to help you by observing at the same time and cross-checking your use of the categories.

Box 4.4 lists some of the advantages and disadvantages of using structured observation.

Box 4.4 Some advantages and disadvantages of using structured observation

Advantages
1. It can be used to observe and analyse a very wide range of situations.
2. It provides a record of what people actually do, rather than what they say that they do (as in interviews and questionnaires).
3. There is a wide range of existing structured observation schedules that can be picked 'off the shelf'.
4. If you can find an existing schedule appropriate for your research, you can generate quantitative data of known reliability and validity.
5. It produces coded quantitative data that can be quickly and easily analysed.
6. The use of very clearly defined observational categories reduces the subjectivity and bias found in unstructured observation.

Disadvantages
1. Devising your own observation schedule is complex and time-consuming.
2. Existing observation schedules will often not be exactly right for your purposes.

Selecting the Method(s) of Collecting Data

3. Even if you find the 'right' schedule, it will take time and effort to be proficient in its use.
4. You need to demonstrate that you have achieved acceptably high standards of reliability in its use, usually through having a colleague provide independent observations.
5. Reactivity (the effects of the observer on what is happening) can be a serious problem.
6. It oversimplifies and decontextualizes complex situations, as only a small number of easily observable behaviours can be captured in observation schedules.

Participant observation

As the term suggests, participant observation is defined by the role taken by the observer. He, to some greater or lesser extent, actually participates in the situation being observed. It is an approach originating in ethnography, where it is closely linked to ethnography, but it is now popular in many areas of social research. There is a range of possibilities. At one extreme, the complete participant. Here the researcher is effectively just another member of the group involved. In some situations, this is done in a covert manner; i.e. the researcher does not reveal that he is observing the group for research purposes. This raises serious ethical issues. Justification has been claimed as this being the only way in which the research could be carried out. For example, it is fair to assert that it isn’t feasible to reveal one’s research intentions before participating in a terrorist group.

I have difficulties with this attempt at justification, while acknowledging that this effectively rules certain situations as being out of bounds for research. Perhaps this should be approached on a case by case basis, with exhaustive analysis of the ethical issues. However, I suggest that your own ethical dilemma is solved by recognizing that a situation, so sensitive that you need to be covert, is not one for the novice researcher.

It is still possible to take a full role as group member after making it clear from the outset that part of the reason for your involvement is the research. They will, of course, have to accept you on this basis and give their informed consent to the research (see chapter 5, p. 100). It is always possible that your presence will, in one or more ways, affect what is going on. This reactivity is a particular difficulty in participant observation. Logically, it isn’t possible to have a definitive answer on your effect, as it would need you to observe when you weren’t there! However, there are ways of reducing likely effects, such as prolonged involvement in the working of the group.

More marginal roles are possible. You might, as it were, ‘take a back seat’, not taking a prominent role when there is action, or have your role agreed as being the researcher in their midst.
Making Preparations

Coming 'new' to a situation can pose difficult problems. You may feel that virtually nothing is going on, or that there is a confusing complexity. The jargon used, and local ways of doing things, may be very excluding. Traditional ethnographers take years to come to terms with what is happening. You have weeks or months at best. One possibility is to choose situations where you already have some familiarity and experience. A practitioner-researcher will have helpful previous experience, but making the transition from the practitioner role to participant observer with a research role has its own difficulties.

For participant observers, the data are typically written or taped accounts of what has been observed, made as soon as possible after the event. You may need to show considerable ingenuity to do this as unobtrusively as possible (nipping outside, or hiding in an empty room or wherever). Certainly it is a good rule to get as full an account as possible in the bag, before going to sleep each day. There is nothing to stop you supplementing accounts of what you have observed by informal interviews, getting copies of documents, etc.

Box 4.5 lists some of the advantages and disadvantages of using participant observation.

Observation can also be unstructured and non-participant, although this is relatively rare. This style can be used when it is desired to use unstructured qualitative approaches, but participation is not feasible or it is considered important to avoid reactivity, i.e. to avoid influencing or changing the observed situation. An example might be when studying crowd behaviour at a soccer match. Where, incidentally, the presence of high definition CCTV cameras to monitor troublemakers provides an opportunity to get hold of useful records for analysis – providing you can persuade security to release the tapes to you for this purpose. Such direct observation is one situation where it is generally accepted that informed consent from those videoed is not normally necessary. However, there are still ethical issues. Suppose you are making a video record of behaviour in a public park and capture a crime being committed. Do you report this to the police? My view would be that it depends – on the nature and seriousness of the crime, and on the situation. If you were doing this type of study (whether using a structured observation schedule or unstructured observation) you should have given prior consideration to likely scenarios in discussions with your supervisor, and should take further supervisor advice before acting.

Using observation in your project

If you are going to use observation as a data collection method, you are recommended to follow up one or more of the further reading texts below to get a detailed understanding of what is involved. The website gives links to other relevant websites.