Participant Observation

Purpose

- Observe Human Social Behavior. Often used to observe behavior over time.

- This data collection technique is used when you want to

  - Look at process – how something occurs (i.e., how students work together to complete a service learning project.

  - Collect information from groups that can’t or won’t complete a survey/questionnaire.

  - Minimize socially desirable answers.

  - Are concerned in how behavior will persist across time. (i.e., will student ACTUALLY recycle?)
Participant Observation

**Strengths and Weaknesses**

➤ **Strengths**

➤ Does not rely on attitudes to predict behavior.
➤ Can be used to look at behavior across time.
➤ Can get a more in-depth look at social phenomena
  ➤ Observe phenomena in context within which it occurs.
  ➤ Can observe both verbal and nonverbal indicators

➤ **Weaknesses**

➤ Extremely time consuming.
➤ Can rely too much on interpretation that researcher makes based on the phenomena they observe (subjectivity).
➤ Research can lose objectivity as they participate with group they are studying.
Steps to the Evaluation Research Process

Step 1 – Identify Objectives

Step 2 - Formulate Research Questions Based on Those Objectives

Step 3 – Operationalize Concepts to Measure Questions
  • Valid and Reliable Indicators

Step 4 – Decide on Sampling Technique
  • Draw Sample

Step 5 – Select Data Collection Technique
  • Collect Data

Step 6 – Analyze Data

Step 7 – Write up the Report
Steps to the Evaluation Research Process

This Power Point Will Focus on Step 5

Step 5 – Select Data Collection Technique
  • Collect Data
Types of Data Collection Techniques

• Experiment
  • Laboratory Experiments
  • Field Experiments
  • Field Trials

• Survey Research
  • Mail Out
  • Manually Distributed and Self Administered
  • Face to Face
  • Internet
  • Telephone

• Field Research
  • Content Analysis
  • Participant Observation
  • Intensive Interview

• Secondary Data
Field Research

Types of Field Research
- Participant Observation – observe while participating in activities
- Intensive Interviews – use interview guide to elicit information
- Content Analysis – physical aspects of material objects

Most Common Types of Sampling Designs – generally nonrandom
- Theoretical Sample
- Snowball Sample
- Convenience Sample

Units of Analysis – depends on type of Field Research
- Content Analysis – aspects of material objects
- Participant Observation – individuals or groups
- Intensive Interviews – individuals or focus groups

Most Common Goals of this Type of Research
- Explore – Collect information/data about groups that haven’t been studied before
- Generate generalizations to be used in theory construction (induction)
- Gather information/data about groups who aren’t easily accessible
- Gather information/data about social processes – look at change in human social behavior over time
- Gather in-depth information to provide more detailed understanding of human social behavior – supplements/compliments other types of research
- Test theories and/or sensitizing concepts

Types of Analysis
- Qualitative analysis
  - Develop categories/types of behavior/social phenomena
    - Compare across types (i.e., these types occur together)
    - Compare across time (i.e., these types precede these types)
- Analysis and data collection often occur simultaneously
- Examine what CAN happen – not what tends to happen

Weaknesses
- Time Consuming
- Mentally Exhausting
- Expensive
- Subjective
  - Validity and reliability
  - Lack of intersubjectivity
Participant Observation

- **Purpose**
  - Analyze Social Processes While they are Actually Occurring within the Social Environment. For example

  - Communication process within marriages
  - Organizational process within community after flood
  - Socialization process within families
  - Decision making process in city council meeting
Participant Observation

- Steps in Data Collection Process
  
  - Step 1 - Select a Sensitizing Concept
  
  - Step 2 - Observe phenomena
  
  - Step 3 - Write down Observations
  
  - Step 4 - Look for Patterns across Observations
  
  - Step 5 - Use Inductions to Draw Generalizations
Participant Observation

➢ A Closer Look at Step 1 in Data Collection Process

➢ Step 1 - Select a Sensitizing Concept - Examples
  • Communication process within marriage
    • Sensitizing concept – Gender differences in way men and women ask questions.
  • Organizational process within community after flood
    • Sensitizing concept – Types of leadership styles
  • Socialization process within families
    • Sensitizing concept – Acquisition of language for twins
  • Decision making process in city council meeting
    • Sensitizing concept – Effectiveness of influence skills
Participant Observation

➢ A Closer Look at Step 2 in Data Collection Process

➢ Step 2 - Observe phenomena - Look for

• Common Occurrences
  • What events are common occurrences?
  • Example – Women usually ask open ended questions while men ask closed ended

• Contrasting Events
  • What events are different or unusual?
  • Example – Wives tend to speak less than husbands, EXCEPT when the wife is older than the husband.
Participant Observation

- Tools for Observation
  - Tape Recorders
  - Video Cameras
  - Note Taking
    - Describe Units
    - Or units within units
      - Teachers
      - Schools
    - Note unusual aspects
    - Note common aspects
    - Try to record quotes as much as possible
    - Start with chronological report of what you do
    - THEN record what you SEE
Participant Observation

One of the Best Ways to Learn how to “do” participant observation is to read books based on participant observation.

Examples of Participant Observation

- “Man’s Search for Meaning” – Holocaust
- “The Working Poor” (observations and intensive interviews) – Poverty in America
- “Code of the Street” – Race Relations
- “Black Like Me” – Race Relations
- “Street Corner Society” – Gangs
- “Turning Stones” – Child Abuse
- “Ordinary Resurrections” – Education
Commonly Asked Questions

- Where should I write my journal?
  - You should have a small spiral notebook that you keep in your purse/pocket/backpack etc. You will keep this notebook with you, and record “memory sparkers”. “Memory sparkers” are short notes that will remind you of relevant events. You should record these as soon as possible. You will then write about the events at home that evening.
  - You will also need somewhere to record events when you arrive home in the evenings (before you sleep!). These entries may be as short as one sentence or as long as several pages. You can do one of the following:
    - Tape record your journal
    - Type your journal on a computer
    - Handwrite your journal in a notebook (Please write legibly!)

- Who should keep a Journal?
  - Every intern should keep a journal, but only those who are doing a qualitative research project will be required to turn it in.
  - Anyone who wants to maximize the benefits from their internship should keep a journal.

- When should I write in my Journal?

  Your data will be much more accurate if you write down your notes BEFORE you sleep on it!!

  - Record “memory sparkers” and relevant quotes in your small spiral notebook as soon as possible.

- What should I write in my Journal?
  - Your first journal entry should include a description of the agency

Write DOWN exactly what you see.
Do not Interpret!!
Next you will write what you OBSERVE
to be interested. At first this will include everything you see, but once you have identified a research question, then quickly narrow down your observations to address your research question.

Write down EXACTLY what you observe. Don’t infer or make assumption about motivation, emotional states etc. Be as specific as possible. Describe events in as much detail as possible.

In a different pen/font you can then write down the following:
- Your interpretation of the events you observed
- Generalizations based on your specific observations. Note patterns – commonalities across people, time and place. Also note obvious differences (which of these things is not like the other ones).
- Notes to guide future observations. For instance, you might decide you should pay more attention to gender differences in the way people react to criticism from their supervisor.

As you continue this process, your notes should become more specific and more details – more centered on the research question you have developed.

Who Should See my Journal?
- The entries in your journal should be kept confidential. Therefore you should do the following:
  - Do not record “classified” information in your journal.
  - Do not allow ANYONE to read your journal.
  - You cannot interview clients or children under 18. You can interview employees as “experts”. This means you cannot ask them about their personal lives. Thus, there should NOT be any of these types of interviews in your journal!
  - Use pseudonyms in your journal. This is a safety precaution.
  - Use pseudonyms that are easy for your to identify/attach to “real” names, places and people. You will use these same pseudonyms in your paper.
CAUTION

- Institutional Review Board

- If you want to use your data to publish

- IF you are "researching" THEN you must

  - Take IRB certification exam on-line (USU website)
  - Complete and submit IRB forms
  - Have your study approved by the IRB
    BEFORE you start data collection process
• Dr. Carol Albrecht
• USU Extension
• Assessment Specialist
• 979-777-2421
• Carol.albrecht@usu.edu