UNIT 9: OBSERVATION

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9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to-

- understand observation as a qualitative research method
- understand the meaning, purpose, advantages and disadvantages of the two types of observation
- understand the importance of and differences between participant and non-participant observation as qualitative research methods

9.2 INTRODUCTION

Sociology first developed in Europe in 19 th century when industrialization resulted in massive social changes. Accompanying these social changes were intellectual changes during which science started to enjoy a higher reputation than ever before. Science appeared to be capable of producing objective knowledge that could be used to solve human problems and increase human productive capacity in an unprecedented way. It was therefore not surprising that many early sociologists chose to turn to science for a methodology on which they could base their subject.

However, not all sociologists agreed that it is appropriate to adopt the methodology of natural sciences. For these sociologists, studying human behavior is fundamentally different from studying the natural world, and they supported the use of more humanistic and qualitative method. Human beings are social creatures who behave and not just react to external stimuli and so have to be studied in the laboratory of the world for a better understanding of their social behavior. Thus, in social science research, observation, both participant and nonparticipant, serve as important tool of qualitative data collection. This will further be discussed in details as the unit proceeds.

9.3 OBSERVATION: MEANING AND DEFINITION

In social science research, observation directly refers to a data collection method where the data is collected through observing. According to Marshall and Rossman (1989), observation is the "systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study". It presents a "written photograph" of the situation under study by allowing the researcher to use her five senses to describe the existing situations (Erlandson et al 1993). Observation can be both structured and unstructured. A structured observation uses pre-defined schedules and specific variables. Unstructured observation however adopts a more open approach towards the object of study or the field from which the data is to be collected.

There is a varied range of ways in which observation as a method has proved to be useful to researchers. Observation lets the researcher understand his field beyond theories and pre-assumptions. There are a number of facts that the interviewees are unable to reveal during interviews and discussions. Further, there are certain other information on which they tend to overemphasize. Observation helps the researcher to check the validity of what has been told by the interviewees, and also to look for what probably have been left unsaid, for example, feelings, sentiments or practices which could not be verbally expressed by the interviewees, or who is interacting with whom, or how much time is being spent in various activities, what are the practices that have been actually going on, and so on (Schmuk 1997).

Observation method demands prolonged engagement of the researcher in the chosen social setting or situation. It requires the researcher to observe and record data multiple times from the same social setting. Recording each observation and cross-checking the data recorded is important for validation of the data collected and for deriving at a logical and objective understanding of the field.

Observation of the interviewees in their own comfortable space or natural setting thus provides the researcher with a clearer and more empathetic picture of the field. Studying behaviors that occur naturally within natural contexts seldom leaves room for manipulation of data on the part of the researcher. It is also most likely that the researcher would encounter the field in its rawest setting. It is because of these qualities that observation is considered as an effective tool of data collection while conducting qualitative research.

Observation is primarily of two types- participant observation and non-participant observation.

9.3.1 Participant Observation

Participant observation is a widely used qualitative method of data collection. Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) coined the term participant observation in his ethnographic account of courtship, marriage and family life among the natives of Trobriand Islands. M.N. Srinivas writes that in participant observation, the fieldworker spends several months/years in a

society different from one's own, uses local language to talk to the indigenes, participates in their daily, seasonal and other activities, and as far as possible gathers information during the course of such participation and direct observation. By establishing rapport with the people studied, the researcher collects information about every aspect of the culture that is being studied, thus getting a holistic picture of the same, and finally using that knowledge to make sense of how culture itself functions.

Accrding to Demunck and Sobo (1998), participant observation is the primary method used by sociologists and anthropologists doing fieldwork. Fieldwork involves "active looking, improving memory, informal interviewing, writing detailed field notes, and most importantly, patience. Thus, participant observation is the process that enables researchers to learn about the activities of the people they are studying in the natural setting, through observing and participating in those activities (Dewalt and Dewalt 2001).

Bernard (1994) defines participant observation as the process of establishing rapport within a community and learning to act in such a way that the community begins to feel at ease with the researcher and starts acting naturally; the researcher should then remove herself from the setting or community to immerse in the data so that she is able to understand what is going on and hence is able to write about it. The researcher must include more than just observation in the process of being a participant observer. For example, as a participant observer the researcher is expected to take part in natural conversations, in ceremonies and other daily activities if the need arises. Taking part in such activities enables the researcher to gain firsthand knowledge about ceremonies of the community which one otherwise might not have had access to.

Participant observation is thus characterized by having an open, non-judgemental attitude in which the researcher is interested in learning more about others, is aware of the diverseness of culture that she might encounter, and most importantly, is open to making mistakes which obviously can be corrected through repeated observations. Being a good observer, a patient listener and learner, being open to the unexpected and being reflexive about oneself is what constitutes a good participant observer (Dewalt and Dewalt 1998).

- **Advantages of Participant Observation**

Following are some of the benefits of using participating observation as a tool of data collection :

- **Observation in natural setting:** The chief advantage of participant observation is that it enables the researcher to study the respondents in their natural habitat or setting. It means that the respondents do not come to the researcher's office to give interview or information rather it is the researcher who goes to the respondents and tries to befriend them over the time period of her research. This saves the respondents from the discomfort, uneasiness or consciousness of having to deal with a stranger. As a result, the data that is collected is most likely to be more neutral and authentic.
- **Closeness with the respondents:** A good rapport with the respondents enables the researcher to gain access to the important events of the respondents' lives. This further helps her to interpret the significance of those events in a more sensitive way as she herself is a part of it and therefore can obtain a firsthand knowledge of the activities in the event, apart from listening to the significance in the respondents' own words, which otherwise might not be open for observation by outsiders.
- **Validity and insight:** Participant observation provides rich qualitative data which gives the researcher a firsthand picture of the reality that is at work in society. The researcher gets to know how the people really live, how they behave in a particular situation and what their take on the world is, in general and in particular, thus resulting in the production of a valid empirical data. Personal experiences with the respondents allow the researcher to be more empathetic and reflexive towards her own research. The meanings and viewpoints that get formed through one-on-one interactions enrich the data collected. The researcher gets to go beyond her own value biases, judgement and prejudices to learn more about the values, worldviews, and viewpoints of the respondents.
- **Flexibility:** By virtue of being unstructured and intuitive, participant observation allows the researcher to go beyond a fixed set of field rules and experiment with different ideas or take up different directions in order to gain data. Further, the spontaneous nature of

the field provides the researcher with the flexibility to sometimes go with the flow, which might get her answers to the questions which she probably wouldn't have asked in a normal situation.

Apart from the above, there are certain practical advantages of using participant observation as a data collection method. For instance, the researcher gets the opportunity to interact with respondents who might be otherwise socially unaccepted or unavailable. This can be possible only if the researcher is able to build proper rapport with the respondents and gain their trust. Participant observation provides ample room for such first-hand interactions, thus producing thick and diverse data.

➢ **Disadvantages of Participant Observation**

Despite the advantages that it has as a qualitative research method, there are certain disadvantages that limit participant observation:

- **Time-consuming exercise:** The most common and widely acknowledged disadvantage of participant observation is that it is tediously time-consuming. Spending quality time with the respondents with the motive of collecting data and at the same time constantly being careful of gaining and not breaking their trust can become a hard task. Patience can be an issue, and repetition of data in conversation can appear irritating over a period of time.
- **Lack of objectivity:** Most of the times it becomes difficult for the researcher to maintain an objective mind while building close relationships with the respondents and participating in their activities. Emotional attachments and sentimental ties might lead to value and moral bias which in terms may negatively impact the data collected. The researcher is also vulnerable to groupism that might exist among the respondents, thus lessening possibilities of accessing neutral data. Continuous and prolonged involvement may evoke sympathy of the researcher towards the respondents.

  Prolonged familiarity is likely to make him ignore certain events as regular which he/she probably should notice as issues.
- **Difficulty in documenting data:** By virtue of being a physically and psychologically engaging exercise, documenting data during

participant observation can become an issue. The researcher might find it hard to write down or record the data when a respondent is providing important information through a casual conversation.

Confidentiality and ethical concerns also become an issue, as many respondents do not want the information to be shared anywhere else. In such situations, the researcher has to heavily rely on her memory to remember importants points of conversations, and also has to stay true to her research ethics on what to add to her notes as data and what to let go.

- **Issue of representation:** By its very nature, participant observation has to be carried out among a small, closed group or community in order to gain an in-depth and thick data in which researcher is able to reach out to maximum number of respondents and build rapport with most of them. However, the issue of representation comes up here, as the values, viewpoints, opinions, events and social life in general of the community which is studied might not be representative of a greater or universal culture.

Participant observation thus validates the fact that all forms of knowledge are situated knowledge, and have to be understood in their own unique contexts.

9.3.2 Non-Participant Observation

Non-participant observation is a research technique in which the researcher takes up the role of a mere observer. Unlike participant observation, here the researcher observes the subjects of her study with the latter's knowledge, but does not take active part in their activities. J. Patrick Williams (2008) cites a number of reasons as to why the researcher might choose non-participant observation over participant observation. First, a limited access to a particular group. For example, conducting participant observation in a riot-affected area is dangerous and often not feasible due to the spontaneity of events that might disturb the research in multiple ways. In such a situation, non-participant observation is carried out

to collect data on that issue, which may include scrutinizing available videos published by news agencies or insiders, or observing films and other audio/visual records available at that time on that issue.

Second, the researcher could be in a position where she takes up a particular topic for study but cannot possibly be a participant observer in the same. For example, the researcher wants to study how parents behave with their children in a public place, or what may be the experience of an athlete in sports. However, the researcher might be neither an athlete nor a parent. In that case, the researcher can be present in the same setting as that of her subjects of study and observe them without directly interacting with them. Third, the researcher might be more interested in deriving patterns of social behavior in a certain social setting instead of delving deep into the subjectivity that occurs in extensive personal interactions. An example of this could be the popular social media these days. Social media today provides enough anonymity to study social patterns or mass psychology that might be formed out of online public interactions, without the researcher necessarily having to take active part in those interactions. Thus, in a non-participant observation, the researcher does not actively take part in the activities of the group being studied. It means passive participation in an event where the observer is a mere spectator to what is happening in the particular situation. This also means that obtaining thick data may become extremely difficult as the researcher is not able to penetrate deep into the situation concerned without actually participating in it. Just like participant observation, non-participant observation has its own advantages and disadvantages. Some of them are discussed below.

- **Advantages of Non-Participant Observation**
  - **Objectivity and neutrality :** Not actively participating in a situation helps the researcher to observe it with a neutral understanding. It also helps her to gather an objective understanding of what is happening, without being influenced by biases that might occur in

active participation. She is also able to notice the occurings which otherwise were likely to get skipped in the hustle of active participation.

- **Accuracy in analysis:** Non-participant observation enables the researcher to be somewhat more careful in his observation, resulting in more accuracy of research findings. The researcher is able to judge or interpret from a certain distance and understand the importance and significance of events more accurately, as she is not distracted by pressure of performance due to participation. The resultant data is potentially free from getting colored by sympathy or sentiments.
- **Distance from unnecessary situations:** Non-participant observation is likely to save the researcher from any potential danger situations as well as from falling a victim to unnecessary groupism. Not having to choose a side and just being able to be a neutral observer enables the researcher to gather data which is less biased and more neutral, gaining her perspectives from both sides.
- **Freedom from issues of ethics:** Not having to be bothered about ethical concerns is an advantage of non-participant observation. Since the group being observed is often aware of the researcher's position as an observer, the researcher is often free from the burden of concealing and revealing. This potentially helps her to focus on her data.

➢ **Disadvantages of Non-Participant Observation**

- **Lack of subjectivity :** It is likely that a non-participant observation of any social context will provide a limited insight to the meanings that may be formed out of it. Lack of interaction with the respondents or the group studied prevents the researcher from getting a subjective and empathetic understanding of a social situation. This might also result in misinterpretation of data, and also misrepresentation of the people being studied.
- **Inadequacy or lacuna in observation:** In a non-participant observation, the observation often takes place at the surface level, i.e., the researcher observes only what is happening right in front of her eyes. The respondents may consciously or unconsciously

conceal certain information which may then go unnoticed by the researcher, making her lose potentially important data.

- **Inconvenience in terms of access:** Non-participant observation can be inconvenient for both the researcher and the researched in terms of being uncomfortably aware of each other's presence. The formal nature of presence often creates disturbance in the natural flow of research as some respondents or communities might not be comfortable with their activities being observed by an outsider (the researcher), leading to inconvenience in collecting information/ data by the researcher. Further, knowledge of being observed might also lead some groups to behave in a certain way to please the researcher. Manipulation of facts and information by respondents in a formal setting affect research in a negative way.

9.3.3 Participant and Non-Participant Observation : Similarities and Differences

The primary difference between participant and non-participant observation is that in the former the researcher joins the group being studied and actively takes part in their activities, thereby collecting data from first-hand empirical experience, whereas, in the latter the researcher may be physically present in a social situation but is not actively involved in the activities going on. She takes up the passive role of an observer and observes the activities going on in the situation being studied. However, in both the methods, the researcher may or may not inform the group to be observed that she is observing them. Here, ethical position of the researcher might be a concern as certain sensitive topics or situations might require the researcher to tell the studied group that they are being observed. The advantage of participant observation is that the researcher gets thick description of the field resulting in a rich data. In non-participant observation, the data is often not very subjective and rich. However, participant observation may result in a more biased data while non-participant observation provides the researcher with potentially neutral and less biased data. Participant

observation might lead the researcher to lose out on noticing important data by brushing it off as regular, whereas non-participant observation leaves room for a more detached approach towards the field, enabling the researcher to be comparatively accurate and objective in his/her study. However, traditional sociologists and social anthropologists still give high regards to participant observation as a qualitative method of data collection, sheerly because it allows the researcher to deal with her field empirically, by getting involved in the lives of those who she is studying, by living with them and understanding their day to day life, thereby enriching the data with empathy, reflexivity and situatedness. Participant and non participant observation can complement each other to frame a meaningful qualitative research. While in some social situation it is essential for the researcher to just sit back and observe what is going on in the scene, some other situation might demand an active participation on the part of the researcher to get an indepth understanding of the event taking place. Thus, the researcher is expected to be smart enough to employ either of the two methods of observation wherever applicable.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q. 1. : Fill in the blanks :

(a) Observation is a _____ method in which data is collected through _____.

(b) There are primarily _____ types of observation.

(c) The term participant observation was coined by _____.

(d) Participant observation involves _____ participation of the researcher in an activity.

(e) Participant observation provides _____ knowledge about the people that are being studied.

(f) In non-participant observation, the researcher does not actively take part in the activities taking place in the field. True or false?

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9.4 LET US SUM UP

After reading this unit, you must have learnt the following points-

- Observation refers to a data collection method where the data is collected through observing.
- Observation can be both structured and unstructured- a structured observation uses pre-defined schedules and specific variables, whereas an unstructured observation does not follow a given schedule.
- Observation helps the researcher to check the validity of what has been told by the interviewees during interviews.
- Observation requires the researcher to observe and record data multiple times from the same social setting for validating the data and to derive an authentic conclusion.
- Observation is primarily of two types- participant and nonparticipant.
- Participant observation is the process that enables researchers to learn about the activities of the people they are studying in the natural setting, through observing and participating in those activities.
- Participant observation provides first-hand or empirical knowledge about the field being studied.
- Being a good observer, a patient listener and learner, being open to the unexpected and being reflexive about oneself is what constitutes a good participant observer.
- Non-participant observation is a research technique in which the researcher takes up the role of a mere observer.
- In non-participant observation the researcher observes the subjects of her study with the latter's knowledge, but does not take active part in their activities.
- Participant and non participant observation can complement each other to frame a meaningful qualitative research.



9.5 FURTHER READING

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4) Marshall, Catherine & Rossman, Gretchen B. (1989). Designing qualitative research. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

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9.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to Q No 1

a) data collection, observing
b) two
c) Bronislaw Malinowski
d) active
e) empirical
f) true