UNIT 12 OBSERVATIONAL RESEARCH

Prepared for the Course Team by Peter Foster

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ASSOCIATED STUDY MATERIALS

Offprints Booklet 3, 'Inside the primary classroom', by M. Galton, B Simon and P. Croll.

Reader, Chapter 15, 'Observation and the police: the research experience', by M Punch

1 INTRODUCTION

Within everyday life we are all observers We constantly observe the physical organization of the environment around us, and we observe the behaviour of the human beings who inhabit that environment Observation involves watching, of course, but information from sight is supported by that received through our other senses — through hearing, smelling, touching and tasting (these are even more important for blind or partially sighted people). The information from these various senses is usually combined, processed and interpreted in complex ways to form our observations — our mental images of the world and what is going on in it

In everyday life we use observation to gain information or knowledge so that we can act in the world In this way, my observation of traffic enables me to drive in such a way that I avoid colliding with other vehicles (if it is successful!), my observation of the behaviour of my three-year-old son enables me to decide when he is tired and I should put him to bed, and my observation of the behaviour of strangers I meet enables me to decide whether they are friendly or threatening (amongst other things) and how I should behave towards them In fact, my observation, and of course interpretation, of the behaviour of others is a major influence on my interaction with them Without observation, participation in the world would be impossible — and when our senses are impaired that participation becomes more difficult

Observation also informs, and enables us to test, our common-sense theories about the social world We all interact with others on the basis of, often taken-for-granted, ideas about how particular types of people are likely to behave in particular circumstances These theories are built up, and continually refined, by observation of the behaviour of others and of ourselves

Observation fulfils similar purposes in research, but there is an important difference Again, the aim is the collection of information about the world with the intention of guiding behaviour. However, observation is not usually done simply to enable the researcher to decide how to act in the world or to inform his or her common-sense theories Its aim is the production of public knowledge (empirical and theoretical) about specific issues, which can be used by others in a variety of ways. This knowledge may influence the behaviour of those who access it, but its influence will be less direct than is the case with everyday observation.

Do you think there are any other differences between observation in everyday life and observation in research?

I think there are two further distinctive features of observation in research — first, the way it is organized and second, the way observations are recorded, interpreted and used In research, observation is planned and conducted in a systematic way, rather than happening spontaneously and haphazardly as it usually does in everyday life. Appropriate techniques are carefully selected for the purposes at hand. Observations are systematically recorded rather than stored only in personal memory, and are carefully interpreted and analysed, again employing systematic and planned procedures Moreover, the data produced by observational research are subjected to checks on validity so that we can be more confident about their accuracy than is usually the case with observational data produced routinely in everyday life.

As part of research, observation can be used for a variety of purposes It may be employed in the preliminary stages of a research project, to explore an area which can then be studied more fully utilizing other methods, or it can be used towards the end of a project to supplement or provide a check on data collected in interviews or surveys (see, for example, Stacey, 1960, Bennett, 1976, Rex and Tomlinson, 1979) Where observation is the main research method employed, it may be

used to obtain descriptive quantitative data on the incidence of particular sorts of behaviour or events (see, for example, Galton *et al*, 1980, Sissons, 1981), or to enable qualitative description of the behaviour or culture of a particular group, institution or community (see, for example, Malinowski, 1922, Whyte, 1981) In the latter case, observation is used as part of a broad approach to research, usually referred to as ethnography, which uses a combination of data-gathering techniques (I discuss this further in Section 1 2) Observation may also be used to develop and test particular theories, and situations or cases may be deliberately selected for observation in order to facilitate this (see, for example, Glaser and Strauss, 1967, 1968, Brophy and Good, 1974).

The range of topics which have been studied by means of observational research is vast Almost every aspect of human behaviour has been investigated. To pick just a few examples, in recent years there have been studies of particular sorts of behaviour such as children's play (Pellegrini, 1989), political oratory (Atkinson, 1984), homosexuality (Humphreys, 1970) and petty crime (Ditton, 1977), studies of categories or groups of people such as football hooligans (Williams *et al*, 1984), street gangs (Patrick, 1973), police officers (Brewer, 1991), studies of particular events or changes in people's lives such as children's transition from primary to secondary school (Measor and Woods, 1984) or the socialization of medical students (Becker *et al*, 1961), studies of particular places and institutions such as courts (Atkinson and Drew, 1979), schools (King, 1978, Ball, 1981) or psychiatric hospitals (Rosenhan, 1982), and there have been studies of residential (Hannerz, 1970), religious (Barker, 1984) and minority ethnic communities (Pryce, 1979).

1.1 THE ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS OF OBSERVATIONAL RESEARCH

Observation as a research method has a number of clear advantages over interviews and questionnaires First, information about the physical environment and about human behaviour can be recorded directly by the researcher without having to rely on the retrospective or anticipatory accounts of others For a number of reasons such accounts may be inaccurate For example, they may be shaped by the particular role the person plays in ways that make the account misleading, the information may not have been systematically recorded and may therefore contain errors, or the account may be distorted by the person's concern to present a desirable image of him- or herself Since observation enables the researcher to note down what he or she sees as it occurs, observational data are often more accurate

Second, the observer may be able to 'see' what participants cannot. Many important features of environment and behaviour are taken for granted by participants and may therefore be difficult for them to describe It may require the trained eye of the observer to 'see the familiar as strange' and provide the detailed description required Moreover, important patterns and regularities in environment and behaviour may only be revealed by careful, planned observation by a researcher over a period of time

Third, observation can provide information on the environment and behaviour of those who cannot speak for themselves and therefore cannot take part in interviews or complete questionnaires — babies, very young children and animals are obvious examples It can also give data on the environment and behaviour of those who will not take part in interviews or complete questionnaires because they have not the time, or because they object, or because they fear the consequences In fact, some form of observation (perhaps covert) may be the only way of collecting information on the behaviour of people who are extremely busy, are deviant, or are hostile to the research process for some reason (see Taylor, 1984, for example) [1]

[1] I discuss the ethical issues raised by certain forms of observational research in Section 2 5

A final advantage, which I mentioned earlier, is that data from observation can be a useful check on, and supplement to, information obtained from other sources So, for example, the information given by people about their own behaviour in interviews can be compared with observation of samples of their actual behaviour.

However, there are also limitations to observation as a research method The environment, event or behaviour of interest may be inaccessible and observation may simply be impossible (or at least very difficult) This may be because the social norms surrounding the event or behaviour do not usually permit observation (as with human sexual behaviour, for example), because the behaviour deliberately avoids observation (as with many forms of deviance), because the event or behaviour occurs rarely or irregularly (as with disasters), because the observer is barred from access to the event or behaviour (as is frequently the case in studying powerful élite groups), or because the event or behaviour happened in the past Sometimes events and behaviour are just not open to observation

A second limitation is that people may, consciously or unconsciously, change the way they behave because they are being observed, and therefore observational accounts of their behaviour may be inaccurate representations of how they behave 'naturally' This is the problem of reactivity which we will discuss later in the unit, in particular in Sections 2 2, 2 3 and 5 1

A third limitation is that observations are inevitably filtered through the interpretive lens of the observer It must therefore be emphasized that observations can never provide us with a direct representation of reality. Whatever observational method is used, what the observer obtains from observational research are constructed representations of the world Moreover, observers inevitably have to select what they observe and what observations they record Sometimes the basis of these selections is made explicit, but at other times it is not, and clearly there is a danger that the researcher's preconceptions and existing knowledge will bias his or her observation

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that observational research is very time consuming, and therefore costly, when compared with other methods of data collection This means that the researcher may only be able to observe a restricted range of subjects or a small sample of the behaviour that is of interest As a result, the representativeness of observations may often be in doubt In some cases interviews or questionnaires may be a more economical way of collecting detailed data which are more broadly representative

1.2 APPROACHES TO OBSERVATIONAL RESEARCH: MORE- AND LESS-STRUCTURED OBSERVATION

There are a number of different approaches to observational research One important distinction is between more-structured (sometimes referred to as 'systematic') observation and less-structured (sometimes referred to as 'ethnographic' or 'unstructured') observation These two approaches originate in different academic traditions, and have different aims, purposes and procedures

More-structured observation

The roots of more-structured observation are in the positivist tradition in social science where the aim has been to emulate, to one degree or another, the approaches and procedures of the natural sciences The emphasis in this tradition has been on the accurate and objective measurement of observable human behaviour, on the precise definition and operationalization of concepts, on the production of quantitative data, on the examination of relationships between variables using experimental and statistical techniques, and on the systematic testing of theories using what has been termed the 'hypothetico-deductive' method

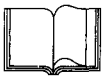
The aim of more-structured observation, then, is to produce accurate quantitative data on particular pre-specified observable behaviours or patterns of interaction.

These data concern the frequency, duration or, in some cases, quality of particular behaviours, and may also record the types of people involved, or the physical, social or temporal context in which the behaviour occurs It may be used to describe patterns of behaviour amongst a particular population or in a particular setting, or, especially where the data are produced in controlled experiments, to test pre-existing theories and hypotheses concerning the nature and causes of behaviour

The essential characteristic of more-structured observation is that the purposes of the observation, the categories of behaviour to be observed and the methods by which instances of behaviour are to be allocated to categories, are worked out, and clearly defined, before the data collection begins So, in this sense, there is maximum prestructuring A variety of different techniques is used to record behaviour (I will elaborate in Section 4), but all involve some sort of pre-set, standardized observation schedule on which a record (often ticks or numbers) of the type of behaviour of interest can be made The role of the observer is to follow carefully the instructions laid down in the observation schedule, thereby minimizing observer subjectivity

An example of a structured observation system used to record aspects of teacher–pupil interaction in classrooms can be found in the Flanders interaction analysis categories, as illustrated in Table 1 The behaviour, observed at three-second intervals, is coded into one of ten categories The schedule can give useful data on the proportion of class time taken up by different types of activity

It is possible to use more-structured observation to collect data on a large scale by employing a team of observers all using the same observation schedule in the same way As observational procedures are standardized, the data collected by each observer can be collated, and quantitative comparisons can be made on a number of dimensions — for example, different situations, times and subject types Using the Flanders schedule, for example, we could compare the proportion of school class time taken up by different activities between teachers, schools, curriculum areas, time periods, etc The results of such research are cumulative, which means we can build up our knowledge of the particular behaviour in question over a period of time It is also possible to establish the reliability of more-structured techniques by, for example, comparing the data from two researchers observing the same behaviour and using the same schedule



READING AND ACTIVITY 1

You should now read 'Inside the primary classroom', by M. Galton *et al*, which is reproduced in Offprints Booklet 3. This describes the observation methods used in the Observational Research and Classroom Learning Evaluation (ORACLE) project. In part, the project originated in debates concerning the relative merits of 'traditional' and 'progressive' teaching in primary schools Its aims were to collect accurate and objective data, which were (and are!) rather lacking in the debate about the nature of teacher and pupil behaviour in primary schools, and to search for factors which might explain any differences in teacher behaviour Fifty-eight teachers in nineteen schools were studied by nine observers. When you have read the extract, check your understanding by answering the following questions.

1 On what aspects of (a) pupils' behaviour and (b) teachers' behaviour did the observers focus?

2 How did the observers sample (a) pupils and pupils' behaviour and (b) teachers and teachers' behaviour?

3 How did the researchers check the reliability of the observational techniques?

4 What sorts of contextual information did they collect?

5 Finally, try to make a brief assessment of the research methods used What advantages and disadvantages can you identify?

You will find my answers at the end of the unit

Table 1 Flanders' interaction analysis categories* (FIAC)

* There is *no* scale implied by these numbers Each number is classificatory, it designates a particular kind of communication event To write these numbers down during observation is to enumerate, not to judge a position on a scale

(Source Flanders, 1970, p 34)

Less-structured observation

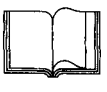
The origins of less-structured observation lie in anthropology and in the application of its ethnographic approach to the study of communities and groups in industrialized societies, pioneered, for example, by the Chicago School of Sociology (a brief history of this can be found in Burgess, 1982) Research in this tradition has generally rejected the positivist approach to social science and has stressed that to understand human behaviour we need to explore the social meanings that underpin it It has emphasized studying the perspectives of social actors — their ideas, attitudes, motives and intentions, and the way they interpret the

social world — as well as observation of behaviour in natural situations and in its cultural context

Less-structured observation therefore aims to produce detailed, qualitative descriptions of human behaviour which illuminate social meanings and shared culture These data are combined with information from conversations, interviews and, where appropriate, documentary sources to produce an in-depth and rounded picture of the culture of the group, which places the perspectives of group members at its heart and reflects the richness and complexity of their social world Less-structured observation is characterized by flexibility and a minimum of prestructuring This does not mean that the observer begins data collection with no aims and no idea of what to observe, but there is a commitment to approach observation with a relatively open mind, to minimize the influence of the observer's preconceptions and to avoid imposing existing preconceived categories It is not unusual, therefore, for the focus of the research to change quite dramatically during the course of data collection as ideas develop and particular issues become important The aim of less-structured observation is also often to develop theory, but here theory tends to emerge from, or be grounded in, the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) Rather than developing a theory and then collecting data specifically to test that theory, data collection, theory construction and testing are interwoven So theoretical ideas develop from initial data collection and then influence future data collection — there is a cumulative spiral of theory development and data collection

As one of the key aims of this type of observation is to see the social world as far as possible from the actor's point of view, the main technique used is participant observation Here the observer participates in some way with the group under study and learns its culture, whilst at the same time observing the behaviour of group members Observations are combined with interviews, conversations and so on, and are generally recorded using field notes and, where possible, audio or video recordings

Obviously, less-structured observation cannot provide the large-scale comparative data on particular behaviours that is possible with more-structured methods, but it can produce far more detailed data on the behaviour of particular individuals or groups in particular settings It gives qualitative data which, in combination with data of other kinds, can explicate the social and cultural basis of human interaction Less-structured observation frequently involves the researcher spending long periods of time in the field, building relationships and participating in social interaction with subjects The aim is that subjects come to trust the researcher and become accustomed to his or her presence Consequently, the data produced may be less influenced by reactivity — by the researcher and the research process Less-structured observation provides data which enable us, as outsiders, to see the social world more from the point of view of those we are studying — it gives us some sense of an insider's perspective Because we are more able to appreciate the cultural context of behaviour and examine the motives and meanings given to behaviour by subjects, we may be better able to understand their social action Less-structured observation also gives us the opportunity to examine the way interactions and social meanings change and develop over time, and the way in which social order is actively constructed by social actors through interaction Finally, the method is particularly suited to the development, rather than the rigorous testing, of theory



READING AND ACTIVITY 2

You should now read Chapter 15 in the Reader, 'Observation and the police· the research experience', by M Punch. This is a discussion of the methodology adopted in a study of the occupational culture of uniformed police officers and of policing methods in an inner-city area of Amsterdam.

When you have read the chapter, check your understanding by answering the following questions.

1 Why and how did Punch select this particular group of police officers to study?

2 How did he gain access to the group?

3 What strategies did he use to develop positive relationships with the police officers?

4 How did his role in the group change over the course of the fieldwork?

5 What ethical issues do you think are raised by Punch's research?

6 Why did Punch use participant observation as his main research method?

7 What other sources of data, apart from observation, did he utilize?

8 Do you think he succeeded in reaching 'the inner reality of police work' (p 184)?

You will find my ideas at the end of the unit

Which observational approach is adopted in a particular research project depends on the nature of the problem or the issue being investigated, the theoretical and methodological sympathies of the researcher, various practical considerations, and sometimes the stage which the research has reached

To some extent, my division of the two approaches is rather artificial In practice, researchers often use a combination of approaches Sometimes research which adopts more-structured observation as its main method may begin with a period of less-structured observation This may form part of the pilot work, and can help the researchers identify the type of behaviour on which they wish to focus and enable them to become accustomed to the research setting It is also quite common for research which employs an ethnographic approach to utilize more-structured observational methods at some stage This may happen when the researcher requires quantitative data on particular forms of behaviour In my own research (Foster, 1990), for example, I was interested, among other things, in teacher–pupil interaction in multi-ethnic classes I was concerned with whether teachers gave more of their time and attention to children from certain ethnic groups My overall approach to the research was ethnographic and my observations were generally less-structured, but in this case I felt the need for more quantitative data on specific aspects of teacher behaviour and so I used a structured observation system developed by Brophy and Good (1970) This enabled me to count the number of different types of interaction that teachers had with students of different ethnic groups (the details of this part of my research are contained in Foster, 1989)