
SOCIAL SCIENCE METHODS: OBSERVATIONS

Lori Peek, University of Colorado Boulder
Jessica Austin, University of Colorado Boulder

What is participant and non-participant observation?

Most qualitative and some quantitative researchers engage in some form of observation to gain understanding of a group's social world through systematic watching, careful listening, scrutiny, inquiry, and investigation. The extent to which researchers interact with their field settings, however, differs according to the goals of the research.

Participant observation entails the researcher attempting to systematically understand the social character of the setting by actively observing and engaging in events, rituals, and other social activities alongside those being studied. Most often, participant observers disclose their status and the aims of their work for ethical reasons, even when they choose to fully immerse themselves in their role and the setting that they are studying (see Lofland et al., 2006).

Non-participant observation entails the researcher remaining detached from the activities within the setting rather than attempting to gain insight by taking on a more active participant observer role. In non-participant observation, researchers may disclose themselves and their activities to those in the setting, or they may simply conduct their research in public or semi-public settings without the knowledge of those being observed.

Do I notify people that they are being observed?

This largely depends on the setting you are observing. In post-disaster situations, you may need to receive permission from the appropriate authorities if you even wish to enter an emergency operations center, a shelter, or a school, for instance. In other cases, you do not need permission if you are observing in public areas, such as parks or emergency supply distribution sites.

You must also consider the ethical implications of engaging in covert research; as with all aspects of your research design, you should consider the balance between likelihood of harm to participants and the potential benefits of your approach, including who will benefit from the research. On the one hand, Roth (1970:279) noted that "When we are observing a crowd welcoming a hero, it is obviously absurd to say that we should warn everybody in the crowd that a sociologist is interpreting their behavior." On the other hand, the ethical considerations applicable to adopting a covert insider role are considerably different in that research participants could be shocked and harmed to learn that they were observed without their consent. There has been considerable and longstanding debate in the social science literature about this topic, and it is well worth reading (for example, see Erikson, 1967, 1968; Denzin, 1968). In addition, your Institutional Review Board (IRB) will be able to provide additional guidance, as may professional associations. With the advent of various technologies that allow for recording audio, video, and photographs, it is especially important that researchers abide by sound legal and ethical principles that respect participant rights and avoid potential harm.

When is it appropriate to engage in observation?

In general, observation is an appropriate method when the researcher aims to understand social interaction and processes, allowing the researcher to view these phenomena in their physical and social contexts. It is important to note that observation is rarely used as a sole method. Researchers often use in-depth interviews, focus groups, surveys, or other methods to supplement their observations, allowing them to explore the meanings ascribed by participants to their activities. As Lofland et al. (2006:18) point out, “Many social situations...may be masked in everyday interaction and thus be directly apprehensible only through intensive interviewing.” Researchers thus benefit from supplementing observation with other techniques to understand the invisible forces informing social interaction and processes. At the same time, observation itself is a powerful method for understanding what people do rather than only asking about what they say they do.

How can I select an appropriate observation site?

Social scientists who study disasters have long conducted observations in private, quasi-public, and public locations in which social interaction occurs. For example, Kendra and Wachtendorf (2016) observed emergency operations near Ground Zero after the 9/11 attacks in their study of organizational improvisation. In her study of long-term recovery after Hurricane Katrina, Browne (2015) spent years observing family gatherings and other important moments among a large kin network. In their quest to understand children’s recovery trajectories after Katrina, Fothergill and Peek (2015) observed interactions in school classrooms, on playgrounds, and in large mass evacuation shelters among other locations (see Appendix B of *Children of Katrina* for a full list of observation sites and the people and interactions observed).

Although there is much variability, generally speaking, some possible characteristics of a good site for those beginning to learn the practice of observation include places that have:

- 1 to 2 small to moderate sized rooms;
- 5 to 25 people present;
- people at the site who talk to each other;
- people at the site who may have interacted with each other in the past.

Specific examples of favorable settings include: emergency operations centers, places of worship, court rooms, small local bars or restaurants, beauty salons or barber shops, school classrooms, playgrounds, and specific work or organizational settings. More difficult settings include: large supermarkets, shopping malls, large public waiting areas, fast food outlets, large health clubs or sports centers, libraries, and most open places on a college campus.

Remember, whatever setting you choose, it should be informed by your broader research question.

How can I best prepare to carry out observations?

First, you should be well versed in the method. This means that you should have read the literature on the topic and have familiarized yourself with various studies, including ethnographies, that employ participant observation in hazards or disaster research.

It is also important that you are aware of the ethical dimensions of conducting observational research. You should also consult with your IRB or other human subjects oversight committee to ensure proper compliance as you approach your research.

Before beginning your observations, you should try to identify 1 or 2 research questions, hypotheses, or general parameters that will guide your observational practice.

Once you feel ready to observe and you have selected your site, you should spend some time preparing for each observational session. Ask yourself the following questions: What might you want to record about the place, people, and activities in the setting? How might you use all of your major senses to develop the richest notes possible? What questions will guide your initial grand tour observations (i.e., capturing the major features of the setting) and mini tour observations (i.e., writing up the specific details of the space, interactions, etc.)?

Before you leave to conduct your observations, you should ensure that you have an electronic device or small notebook/piece of paper and a pen or pencil so that you can, if possible, record some notes while in the field.

How soon should I write up fieldnotes?

Immediately after leaving the setting, or as soon as reasonably possible, you should type up a full set of fieldnotes from your observations. This will require a block of concentrated time (and may take between 1-10 hours, depending on how long you observed). The final set of fieldnotes should include direct observation notes, as well as researcher inference notes, personal notes, and analytic memos. For more information, see the check sheet on Tips for Writing Observational Fieldnotes.

What are some of the guiding questions that I may use to write up my notes?

What did you observe?

- Where did you go and how long did you stay? How did you decide where to go and how long to observe the setting?
- How did your preparation (i.e., thinking about grand tour and mini tour observations in advance) influence your actual observations in the field? What specific research question(s) did you have in mind when you entered the research site; how, if at all, did these questions change once you began observing?
- What was the setting like? What kinds of people or groups were involved? How did class, gender, age, race, ethnicity, and other differences appear?
- How did groups interact with each other? How did they interact with you (i.e., to what extent were you a participant)?
- What else was happening in the setting? What did you see that was new or unanticipated?

What did you find?

- What kinds of information were you able to obtain from your observations?
- What did you see that ordinarily might not be visible to a casual observer?
- How did you analyze your observational data? Did you try to develop preliminary analytic memos to help flesh out your ideas and early analyses?
- How would you present your interpretation of the field situation?
- Were you able to address your research question(s) using information obtained through your observations?
- Did the observation method help or limit your ability to study and understand the field situation?
- What other research strategies might be used to complement or augment observation in understanding this field situation?

What issues emerged related to your observation experience?

- Did you have to negotiate access to your setting? If so, how did you?
- How did you record your observations and did you encounter any problems? Were you able to use your notebook or phone, for example, to jot down notes?
- How much of a participant were you? What, if any, tensions existed between your roles as a participant and an observer?
- How, if at all, did your presence shape what was occurring in the field situation?
- How did your own theoretical perspective and/or personal identity shape your observations and analysis?
- Did any methodological, emotional, or ethical issues arise that would lead you to approach a similar situation differently in the future?

How long should I plan to conduct observations in my research setting?

Length of observation depends on many issues. If observation is your primary method—that is, if your research question relies heavily on data collected via observation—you will need to spend more time observing. Length of observation will also depend on the scope of your project. If your project is limited to a single research manuscript, you will likely spend less time observing than if you are conducting research for a book. Your research design may impose constraints as well. If, for instance, you are studying disaster emergency response, you may be limited to the time frame during and immediately following the event. When determining how long to observe on any given day, consider researcher and respondent fatigue, especially if your participants are already experiencing stress or emotional hardship. When considering how long to observe for a project, look for signs of saturation, here meaning that no new information is being produced.

REFERENCES:

- Adler, P. A. & Adler, P. (1987). *Membership Roles in Field Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Browne, K. E. (2015). *Standing in the Need: Culture, Comfort, and Coming Home after Katrina*. University of Texas Press.
- Denzin, N. K. 1968. On the Ethics of Disguised Observation. *Social Problems*, 15(4), 502-504.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (2011). *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. 2nd ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Erikson, K. T. (1967). A Comment on Disguised Observation in Sociology. *Social Problems*, 14(4), 366-373.
- Erikson, K. T. (1968). A Reply to Denzin. *Social Problems*, 15(4), 505-506.
- Fothergill, A., & Peek, L. (2015). *Children of Katrina*. University of Texas Press.
- Kendra, J. M., & Wachtendorf, T. (2016). *American Dunkirk: The Waterborne Evacuation of Manhattan on 9/11*. Temple University Press.
- Lofland, J., Snow, D., Anderson, L., & Lofland, L. H. (2006). *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*. 4th ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Roth, J. (1970). Comments on 'Secret Observation.' Pp. 278-280 in *Qualitative Methodology: Firsthand Involvement with the Social World*, W. J. Filstead (Ed.). Chicago: Markham.

Suggested Citation: Peek, L., & Austin, J. (2021). Social Science Methods: Observations. CONVERGE Extreme Events Research Check Sheets Series. DesignSafe-Cl. <https://doi.org/10.17603/ds2-4evc-4k10>.

