

Chapter 9

Collecting primary data through observation

Observation as a data collection method

‘Observation involves the systematic observation , recording, description analysis and interpretation of people’s behaviour’

Saunders *et al.* (2009)

Types of observation

The two main types

- **Participant** observation – emphasises the discovery of meaning attached to actions (qualitative)
- **Structured** observation – is concerned with frequency of actions (quantitative)

Participant observation (1)

Definition

‘Where the researcher attempts to participate fully in the lives and actions of subjects, enabling them to not merely observe what is happening but also feeling it’

Adapted from Gill and Johnson (2002)

Choice of participant observer role

Determining factors

- Purpose of the research and time available
- Degree of suitability felt by the researcher
- Organisational access
- Ethical considerations

Data collection and analysis (3)

Points to consider

- Threats to validity
- The perspective of the subject - not the researcher
- Advantages and disadvantages of participant observation are summarised in Table 9.1

Saunders *et al.* (2009)

Advantages

- It is good at explaining “what is going on” in particular social situation.
- It heightens the researcher’s awareness of significant social process.
- It is particularly useful for researchers working within their own organization.
- Some participant observation affords the opportunity for the researcher to experience ‘for real’ the emotions of those who are being researched.
- Virtually all data collected are useful.

Disadvantages

- It can be very time consuming.
- It can pose difficult ethical dilemmas for the researchers.
- They can be high levels of role conflict for the researcher.
- The closeness of the researcher to the situation being observed can lead to significant observer bias .
- The participant observer role is a very demanding one, to which not all researchers will be suited
- Access to organizations may be difficult.
- Data recording is often very difficult for the researcher.

Structured observation (1)

Points to consider

- Structured observation is systematic and aims to establish straightforward facts
- Structured observation was an important part of Mintzberg's (1973) study of managerial work
- Proliferation of the Internet potentially widens the scope of participant observation
- Advantages and disadvantages of structured observation are summarised in Table 9.2

Saunders *et al.* (2009)

Structured observation (2)

Data collection and analysis

- Choosing an 'off the shelf' coding schedule
- Designing your own coding schedule
- Combining both types of schedule
- Use of simple (manual) or complex (computer) methods of analysis

Structured observation (3)

Threats to validity and reliability

- Subject error
- Time error
- Observer effects and strategies to overcome this –
habituation and minimal interaction Robson (2002)

Summary: Chapter 9

- Participant observation is used in a wide range of social settings
- Participant observation means adopting a number of potential roles
- Roles are differentiated according to the degree of concealed identity and participation in events adopted by the researcher

Summary: Chapter 9

- The aim of participant observation is to develop theory and avoid mere story telling
- Structured observation is concerned with the frequency of events. It is characterised by high levels of predetermined structure and quantitative analysis
- The main threats to reliability and validity are subject error, time error and observer effects