

Slide 9.1

Session 3

Collecting primary data through observation

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, *Research Methods for Business Students*, 5th Edition, © Mark Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill 2009

Slide 9.2

Observation as a data collection method

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

Saunders *et al.* (2009)

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, *Research Methods for Business Students*, 5th Edition, © Mark Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill 2009

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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)

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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)

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Participant observation (2)

Points to consider

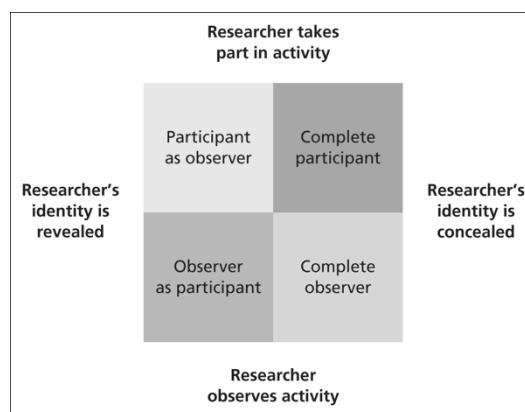
- Used both as the principle research method and in combination with other methods
- Researchers become immersed in the research setting
- Researchers try to understand the process by which individual identity is constructed and reconstructed (symbolic interactionism)

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Researcher roles in participant observation

Typology of participant observation researcher roles



Source: Gill and Johnson (2002)

Figure 9.1 Typology of participant observation researcher roles

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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

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Data collection and analysis (1)

Types of data generated by participant observation

- Primary observations
- Secondary observations
- Experiential data

Delbridge and Kirkpatrick (1994)

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Data collection and analysis (2)

Points to consider

- Data may be classed as ‘descriptive observation’ and ‘narrative account’ Robson (2002)
- Data recording method(s) will depend on the role
- Data collection and analysis may be part of the same process
- Use of analytic induction leads to redefinition of the original hypothesis

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Data collection and analysis (3)

Points to consider

- Threats to validity
- The perspective of the subject - not the researcher

Saunders *et al.* (2009)

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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

Saunders *et al.* (2009)

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, *Research Methods for Business Students*, 5th Edition, © Mark Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill 2009

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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

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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)

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Summary: Session 3

- 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

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Slide 9.15

Summary: Session 3

- 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

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