Observations, Interviews, and Focus Groups

The ultimate court of appeal is observation and experiment, not authority.

Thomas Huxley
British Biologist

Participant Observation: Definition

Participant observation is the process of establishing rapport within a community and learning to act in such a way as to blend into the community so that its members will act naturally, then removing oneself from the setting or community to immerse oneself in the data to understand what is going on in order to write about it.

Types of Participant Observation

• **External Participation**
  – The lowest degree of involvement where the researcher observes a pre-recorded event.

• **Passive Participation**
  – Where the researcher is present at the scene of action but does not interact or participate.

• **Balanced Participation**
  – Where the researcher maintains a balance between being an insider and an outsider. The researcher observes and participates in some activities, but does not participate fully in all activities.

• **Active Participation**
  – Where the researcher generally does what others in the setting do. The researcher begins with observation to learn the rules. As they are learned the researcher becomes actively engaged in the activities of group.

• **Total Participation**
  – Where the researcher is a natural participant. This is the highest level of involvement and usually comes about when the researcher studies something in which he or she is already a natural participant.
Reducing Error and Bias

**Observer Effects**
- The impact of the observer’s participation on the setting or the participants being studied, e.g., “The Hawthorne Effect.”
- When subjects modify their behavior in response to the fact that they know they are being studied, not in response to the experimental treatment.

**Observer Bias**
- Where invalid information or conclusions results from the perspective the researcher brings to the study and imposes upon it.

Increasing Reliability of Observations

- Target specific behaviors
- Use low inference measures
- Use multiple observers
- Train the observers
- Keep the observers blind to conditions
- Strive for inter-rater reliability

Advantages of Observations

- Greater accuracy than interviews. In natural settings, people behave naturally.
- Elimination of recall error.
  - 92% of adults say they *always* wash their hands after using public restrooms. At an Atlanta Braves baseball game, however, only 25% of men were observed to do so.
- Some individuals may not be capable or willing to respond to interview questions.

Disadvantages of Observations

- Time consuming if done well.
- Subjects and setting may not be representative of intended population.
- Difficult to determine the root cause of the observed behavior.
- Difficult to operationalize and code specific behaviors.

Photo Elicitation Example

Using the provided camera, take pictures of:
- Your favorite place to study
- The computer you use in the library
- All the stuff you take to class
- The place where you keep your books
- Your favorite person to study with
- The night before a big assignment or test

Interviews
The outcome of any serious research can only be to make two questions grow where only one grew before.

Thorstein Veblen
Economist & Sociologist

Interviews: Big Ideas

• There’s no such thing as a perfect interview.
• Record practice interviews, then review and critique with a friend or a person with expertise.
• The better you listen, the more articulate your interviewees will become.
• Practice with your recording equipment—it should be unobtrusive.
• Your last interview will be orders of magnitude better than your first. (See second point above.)

Question Sequence

• Begin with easy, low stakes questions to develop comfort and rapport.
• Cluster questions according to themes, but only ask one question at a time.
• Question clusters should begin with a general query followed by questions that are increasingly specific.
• Don’t go lock-step through your questions; be responsive to the statements of the respondent.

Wording

• When possible, use open-ended questions.
  – Questions for which there isn’t a yes/no answer.
• Beware of questions that lead respondents
  – “As a math major, in what way is your need for the writing lab diminished?”
  – When asked what they consider “the most important thing for children to prepare them for life,” 61.5% chose “to think for themselves” when it was offered as a choice in a list. Only 4.6% said this in response to an open-ended question.

Interviewer Responses

• Silent Probe
  – It works because the respondent is uncomfortable with pauses or silence. It suggests to the respondent that you are waiting for what they will say next.
• Overt Encouragement
  – Do so in a way that doesn’t imply approval or disapproval. Say “Uh huh” or “Ok” after their thought.
• Soliciting Elaboration
  – For example?
  – In what way?
  – When was that?

Ask for Clarification

– Sometimes, you can elicit greater detail by asking the respondent to clarify something that was said earlier. “A minute ago you were talking about an experience you had in college, can you tell me more about that?”

Repetition

– You say something without really saying anything new. For instance, the respondent just described a traumatic experience they had in childhood. You might say “What I’m hearing you say is that you found that experience very traumatic.”
Focus Groups

It's really hard to design products by focus groups. A lot of times, people don't know what they want until you show it to them.

Steve Jobs
Entrepreneur

Focus Group: Definition

A focus group discussion is a group discussion of approximately 6-12 persons guided by a moderator, during which group members talk freely and spontaneously about a certain topic determined by the researcher. The researcher's interest provides the focus and the group interaction (what they say and do) produces data.

A Combination of Techniques

Focus Group = (group) interview + observation

While primarily a group interview technique, the observations of interactions among group members are considered a major part of the data collection.

Focus Group Advantages

- Less expensive than some other methods.
- A fast way of gathering a variety of insights.
- Provides and opportunity for interaction between the client and the consumer.
- Group dynamic stimulates conversations and increases the speed of information generation.
- Participants often feel more comfortable answering within a group with similar interests.

Focus Group Disadvantages

- Need highly trained moderator and observers.
- Respondents may take more extreme positions than they actually have outside of focus group.
- Desire to please each other or the moderator.
- May be dominated by one or two participants.
- Self-censorship of ideas that oppose others’ ideas and hesitation to discuss sensitive topics.
- Client/researcher may emphasize information that confirms desired beliefs and minimize that which is contradictory (wish fulfillment).