

Observations as Data Collection Methods

LIOR GIDEON & PETER MOSKOS

From the moment a baby is born, a long learning process begins. Using the five senses, the baby absorbs his or her surroundings by capturing sounds, sights, smells, and tastes, and by touching and feeling objects. It is these basic forms of inquiry that allow newborns to make sense of the world around them. Consequently, it is no wonder that observation is also the most common method of data collection in social research. It is natural and even at times simplistic in its nature. Different from many quantitative approaches to data collection, observation provides the researcher with more in-depth understanding, or *insight*, into the field of study. As discussed previously, in Chapter 20 on ethnography, observation attracts its fair share of criticism, chiefly in regard to the principle of objectivity. This critique is directed toward the researcher's involvement with his or her subjects, involvement that by default is subjective and biased. On the other side, supporters of observations will defend these methods, arguing that they have a unique ability to provide researchers with a thorough understanding, an ability to explain in great detail what dry statistical data cannot comprehend. Those who support observational methods also argue that, unlike quantitative research, qualitative methods allow researchers to observe changes *while* they occur. Many times, while in the middle of data collection, the researcher-observer realizes that the object being studied is quite different from what was initially presumed. If one conducts research with a traditional "scientific" approach of research hypothesis, analysis, and conclusion, one is less likely to notice non-predicted social phenomena. Even worse, the researcher in a remote location—say an air-conditioned university office—may be unaware of the limitations of methods and data. Observational research is much more focused on the *meaning* of the data. These meanings can best be understood in context, as previously discussed, using a *holistic approach*.

Many times, we see or hear and interpret things using our own set of values, even when these may not reflect the actual meaning of the subject. For example, "dog" is a common street nickname in many urban areas in the United States. But of course it needs to be understood within a certain context. "Dog" is simply a nickname for a friend, a "homeboy," a person from the neighborhood. It can even be endearing. But for one author, the foreign-born one, the term sounded like an insult that could easily escalate into a verbal or physical confrontation. Had Gideon not observed the group dynamics and reacted purely on impulse, this could have ended badly. Learning the language and its linguistic nuances is one of the most important stages of observation described by Whyte (1964) in his famous work on *Street Corner Society*. And it is entirely lacking in quantitative studies.

This chapter aims to focus on one of the most common data collection methods in social-science research, one that is often associated with anthropology. Many important

criminological and criminal justice studies lean on observation as their main method. It is due to such research methodology that we have gained insights into the fascinating mosaic of criminal justice professions and experiences. Such insight many times bursts into the field like a refreshing breeze of new and well-thought-out theories and theoretical explanations. In many ways, and despite its lower status within the field, observational studies have advanced the field much more than any quantitative methodology.

Observations: Aims and Limitations

The main aim of observation is simply to observe events or behaviors in specific context, and to document clearly and accurately the information provided by the observation. These observations provide the researcher with the basic data to test assumptions and hypotheses. The research hypotheses and their constructs help provide the focus of the observation—what the researcher in the field should look for. Consequently, many observational researchers will construct and operationalize the variables of interest as early in the research process as possible. But in allowing for the flexibility of qualitative research, these preconceived notions will be questioned and perhaps changed during the course of the research. This combination of structure and flexibility is essential to the planning of the research, as it provides a detailed guideline as to who, what, where, and when to observe. It also provides a time frame for finishing the research.

Potential Biases and Criticism of Observation Research

In the previous chapter some of the difficulties associated with ethnography and qualitative studies were discussed. Some of these difficulties are major impediments to the objectivity of the findings, and, as previously discussed, provide ammunition to those who criticize the methods. Of course, whether these issues of qualitative objectivity are more significant than flaws inherent to quantitative methods—errors in reliability, validity, and nonrandom missing data—is highly debatable. But when dealing with observation as the main method for data collection, such problems are easy to highlight. Most times, observers cannot eliminate the effect of their presence, nor is such a goal necessarily desirable; but one type of observation—complete pure observation—comes closest to this (discussed in the next section). When the observer makes an attempt to assimilate with the subjects of his or her observation, certain problems and difficulties emerge. Methods that involve assimilation and participation with the observed population are called “participant observation,” which is in fact a group of a few different observation methods that share similar characteristics. There are some problems common to participant observation methods: the risk of being fed biased information by self-selective individuals from the observed population, the risk of “*going native*” (becoming one of the group and perhaps never returning to academia), or simply that the individuals observed might change their behavior or hide certain facts in the presence of the observer in an attempt to please the observer (the “*Hawthorne Effect*”).

A researcher trying too desperately to gain access may face hurdles and methodological issues more significant than any issues related to objectivity. And unless one is a true psychopath, one inevitably becomes less objective as one gains knowledge and understanding of people and social situations. One could say that the only way to remain truly objective is to remain ignorant, which is hardly a desired status for the criminological researcher. But any issues of objectivity should be addressed by the researcher in methodology sections.

Grounded Theory: Motivations for Discretionary Police Arrests

An alternative way to approach observational research, “grounded theory,” was popularized by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The fundamental notion of grounded theory is that one delves into research without preconceived notions and specific research hypotheses. This is not to say that one enters the field unprepared. Rather, one tries to limit observational bias by remaining open to all findings and conclusions. The assumption is that one can all too easily find data to support what one is trying to prove. The researcher must be on guard to weigh all data equally, despite a bias—even if it is subconscious—to selectively give greater weight to supporting data while ignoring or downplaying contradictory findings. At its most simplistic form, grounded theory can be dismissed as going into the researched field unprepared. But the unpredictable nature of much qualitative research can make more focused and pre-planned approaches unrealistic. For instance, Moskos’s (2008) research on Baltimore police began as a participant-observation study of the police academy. What was not part of the research plan was that Moskos would be a police officer, thus transitioning him from a participant observer into a “pure participant,” or what Anderson (2011) contrasts with a participant observer by labeling an “observer participant.” Both terms—“pure participant” and “observer participant”—will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Since the exact course of Moskos’s research was unknown—even the research site could not be predicted until Moskos graduated from the police academy—his research project became a case study of grounded theory in action. During the course of the research, the focus shifted from socialization in the police academy to an in-depth analysis of police effort (and ultimate futility) in fighting the war on drugs in Baltimore’s high-crime Eastern District. Such an approach can be described as “surfing a wave” toward an unknown shore. Such “seat-of-the-pants” research is most commonly seen when a researcher gains access to a hard-to-reach group. In these cases, the researcher can have little if any control over even the basic direction of research. Even the basic research site is beyond the researcher’s control. Moskos, for instance, had no control over where he was assigned to work as a police officer. In his case, the unit of analysis became the squad in which he worked. His qualitative data collection naturally relied most heavily on those police officers with whom he was closest. While such research forgoes any attempt at random sampling and is inevitably open to methodological criticisms related to objectivity, it can also achieve an impressive depth of cultural understanding and meaning.

It is not uncommon for such researchers to go so far as to leave the field still unclear about the basic research question. Time and reflection, taking a step back, become essential steps in helping the observational researcher make sense of the mass of data collected. In Moskos’s case, he discovered that the internal and intradepartmental motivations of police officers—particularly the desire for overtime pay—were by far the more important predictors of arrest discretion. These findings, while not directly contradicting quantitative research, show that traditional research on police discretion—which by and large focuses on race, gender, demeanor, dress, and crime—essentially misses the main point: Officers arrest minor offenders, and do so in high-drug minority areas, when they want to get paid.

Types of Observations

Conducting an observation in the natural habitat is one of the most valuable tools a researcher can have. However, the researcher’s presence may affect the behavior and dynamic of the observed group and its individuals. To overcome this problem, the

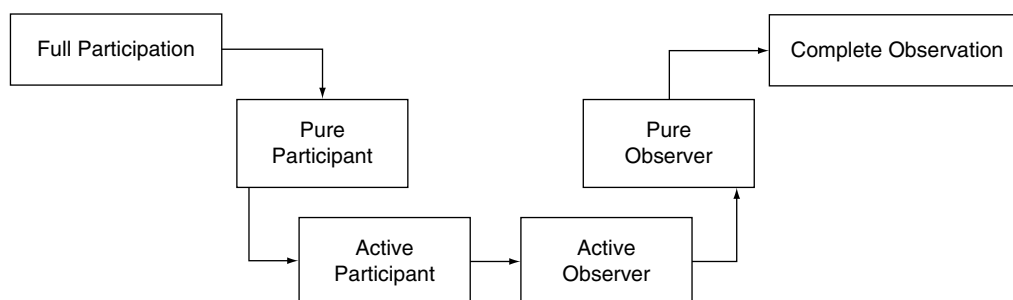
researcher should reduce visibility while trying to assimilate and fit in. One way of doing this emerges from “role-playing” in that the observer chooses to adopt a certain role. For example, Ted Conover (2001) chose to become a guard in order to penetrate the New York State Department of Corrections. Moskos (2008) joined the Baltimore City Police Department. Einat (2005) was invited to sit in prison cells and prison yards with convicted offenders after presenting himself as a researcher from the university who would like to learn about the inmate culture. Whyte (1964) began his research on “street corner society” by presenting his actual aims and goals, and then, when things did not turn out well, befriended an informant by the name of “Doc,” whose friendship with Whyte helped him gain entry.

Observation types can be arranged on a continuum that symbolizes the level of involvement and participation with the observed population. On one side, we can identify the role of a “friend” or full participant in the study’s society. When researchers adopt this type of role, they must hide their true identities and in fact conduct their observation in secrecy. This was the case with Conover (2001), who could not risk the fact that he was a journalist who was interested in learning about U.S. prisons becoming known. But academics are more often than not forbidden from conducting research without the subjects’ consent. Almost all contemporary social-science research is subject to the approval of university human subjects committees, called Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), and must be overt in design. That is, you cannot deceive the research subjects by not telling them what you are up to. Much significant sociological research of the past would no longer be possible today. For instance, Laud Humphreys (1970), in his controversial *Tearoom Trade*, observed gay men engaging in sex in public bathrooms. By writing down license plate information, Humphreys was later able to gather demographic information by visiting the men’s homes in disguise and conducting seemingly unrelated social-science research. Humphreys determined that the majority of the men—who came from very diverse social, racial, and economic backgrounds—went home to their wives and nominally “heterosexual” lives. Though no research subjects were harmed or “outed” (Humphreys himself was, at the time of his research, a closeted homosexual) such a study—controversial even at the time—could never gain IRB approval and be conducted today.

Unlike contemporary social-science research (including Moskos’s 2008 police research), Conover’s prison study was covert. But Conover was a journalist who did not have to gain the approval of an IRB. Contrasting with participant observation is the “stranger,” an observer who does not take an active part in the observed society. The stranger observer has no role in the activity of the observed group, and he or she is truly an observer—observing only, without participating. Between the two extremes of the passive observer and the active participant, we can identify the “pure observer” and the “pure participant.” These two are also opposites and have subdivisions to them that are differentiated by the level of observer involvement and the way in which the researchers introduce themselves to individuals in the observed society. Figure 21.1 illustrates the dichotomy.

The type of observation to be used depends on the characteristics of the society that the researcher is interested in examining. Considerations include how easy or difficult it is to penetrate such a society and gain the trust of the research subjects. In many criminological studies that aim to gain insights on delinquent subcultures, complete observation will not suffice. Nor will it be appropriate for the examination of informal modes of police operations. Penetrating into a culture, such as on-duty prison guards, will have to be done through actual full participation in their daily routine. A point to remember is that the role researchers choose will have an effect not only on the type of observation

FIGURE 21.1: *Types of Observations*



conducted but also on all aspects of field work: what questions will be asked, who may or may not be approached, when and where data can be collected and documented, and who can or cannot be trusted.

In addition to these considerations, researchers can also decide the intensity of their role. Specifically, researchers can decide to be full and complete participants, or they can decide to be remote observers without any interaction with their subjects. They can also decide if they want to observe for a long and continuous period of time, or conduct the research in various stages. If the study is focusing on a very routine type of activity, one that is almost always the same, there is less need to be in the field all the time. Occasional visits and observations may be more than sufficient. If, however, the group observed is very dynamic, the researcher will likely need to immerse himself or herself in the field for a longer time period of continuous observation. Moskos (2008), for instance, remained based in Baltimore for the twenty months he worked as a police officer. If researchers want to be accepted by the people they are studying, they more than likely must spend a great deal of time in the field with the people they study to gain their trust and confidence, often through the natural process of building friendships.

Those observers who come in and out of the field live a double life. They live in the society they examine, and yet they are still a full part of their own natural society from which they come. Since important research issues may arise when the researcher is not present, observations may have certain firsthand gaps. In such cases, the researcher will have to rely on his or her sources and informants to provide needed information. While such secondhand data is not ideal, real-world qualitative research is never ideal. Such limitations may be the result of limited resources or the duality of the researcher's life. Most academic researchers are active scholars who combine research with teaching and sometimes even a private life outside of work. Taking this into consideration, it is easy to understand why most long-term full-participation observations are done by relatively young researchers who can afford the luxury of being away for long periods of time.

Intensive observation such as that where the researcher spend long periods of time in the field are extremely fruitful for research in that they provide the observer with multiple opportunities to observe random events and be a part of the actual society that is the focus of the investigation.

In such cases, the researcher becomes available at all times to individuals of interest in the field, and they in turn provide him or her with a wealth of information. Also, people cannot hide their true nature for long periods of time, and thus a long-term commitment to the

field enables the observing researcher to detect prior behavioral biases that were the results of social desirability. In the few police “ride-alongs” Gideon did early in his career, this became very apparent. At the beginning of the shift, the officer he was assigned to ride with was polite and maintained a professional demeanor. During the long hours of the night shift cooped up in a small cruiser, the officer started to let his guard down. He shared a lot of his life philosophy on how he did his job, why he does or does not give tickets, why he makes arrests and when, and so on. It was during that time that Gideon knew his observation had begun. The nights that followed were interesting in the way they developed. Gideon was able to learn a great deal about the difference between formal and informal police work—a difference that would probably not present itself to him had he left his “ride-along” observation after only a few hours. Moskos (2008) confirms that long stretches of research are necessary, and the times that are seemingly “downtime,” especially for police research, provide the richest sources of data.

Researchers who take the pure-participant approach usually do this for some continuous length of time, although there are those who will use a part-time approach if it is forced on them due to personal or professional constraints, or both.

The Pure Participant

The pure participant is a member of the group being studied. The pure participant shares its chores and enjoys the privileges entitled to its members. It is expected that as a member of the group, he or she will participate in each and every aspect of the group’s social life according to his or her status, role, and rank. At times, the researcher will not even identify himself or herself as such (this is not a desirable situation, generally prohibited by IRBs, and may carry some severe social and research-related consequences upon detection, as was discussed earlier in this chapter). When this is the case, we will call such observation *disguised observation*—which is very similar to the work of an undercover police officer or a spy. As a pure participant, the researcher enjoys a normal status and thus can observe the examined society in its natural state, whereas the reaction to his or her presence may be minimal to nonexistent.

Three different problems emerge in pure-participant observation:

1. As a member of the group, there is no temporary relief, and the observer cannot “escape” the group to decompress. It is also not possible to step aside from an observed situation to ask questions that are not aligned with the researcher’s status, rank, or role in the investigated society. While this may not necessarily be regarded as a problem, researchers should be aware that while they might gain great depth of knowledge, the knowledge is relatively limited in perspective.
2. Since the observer must protect his or her identity, it is possible that many hours will be spent on unrelated tasks that are not research-related. Many times, this can lead researchers to encounters with law enforcement if they are investigating criminal subculture, or into other dangerous, even life-threatening, situations.
3. When the research involves conducting and participating in secretive or illegal activities, ethical issues emerge. Think of a study on the fencing (selling) of stolen property (Cromwell & Olson, 2004). Another example is a researcher who enters a religious sect and through the years of investigating the sect as a pure participant becomes so enmeshed with the sect activity that he becomes one of their high priests. Once he reaches this point, he may not report on its activities, as it will violate the trust of its members who trust and believe in him.

The Pure Observer

Pure observer is the opposite of pure participant. The pure observer avoids fulfilling any function in the society or culture he or she studies. In fact, many observers who use this method of pure observation try to avoid, as much as possible, contact with individuals from the observed society. Although the society under investigation may know it is being observed, its contacts with the observer are minimal. This is not without certain costs. Although the observer can learn a great deal from simply observing subjects, lack of involvement can impede the researcher's ability to gain important insights into social processes that evolve and develop in the observed society. Furthermore, such distance may result in misguided interpretation and conclusions. At times, it may even put the observer at risk. A good example, although the theme was not criminology or criminal justice, is Malinowski's (1922) seminal anthropological work, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, which focused on residents of Trobriand, north of New Guinea. Such nonparticipant observation usually requires a thorough preparation and needs to be highly structured so that the observer will be able to focus on the exact phenomena of interest. Malinowski, on the other hand, was exiled to Trobriand by Australian authorities (under threat of detention). Champion (2006) states that many nonparticipant pure observers believe that the naturalness of the setting they observe provides more accurate information about social realities than it is possible to obtain from survey research or potentially tainted participant observation. Observing individuals in their natural habitats is not as demanding as the previously discussed pure-participation mode of observation, and the ease with which the observer can document observations is one of most salient advantages of this method. Field notes are written while the observer's memory is still fresh, and many times, during the actual observation. With today's technology, they can be recorded and documented with cameras, which brings more reliability to the data. For example, Bar-Av (2006) studied crowd aggression and violence during basketball games using video cameras that captured all four sides of the crowd. The cameras were placed on the court and faced the crowd. Additional cameras were directed toward the basketball court to record the game. The videos were synchronized to enable Bar-Av to obtain chain-of-event insight into what events on the court, if any, preceded what behaviors in the crowd. Hours of video were then transcribed and analyzed, and were compared with interviews of fans. The cumbersome work of transcribing the recorded observations along with the interviews required a long period of time. The study took Bar-Av a few years to complete, and at the end, he concluded that many aggressive and violent behavior incidents were not directly related to what happened on the court but rather were due to the nature of the fans. As explained, using technology, such as video cameras or even voice recorders, creates much more work, since observations must still be transcribed to the written word. And all that precedes even the most basic theoretical analysis. One of the *advantages* of in-field note-taking is that reality cannot be paused and rewound. Transcribing data is time-consuming work, and getting bogged down in linguistics patterns and phonology can distract one from understanding significant social events. Also worth considering is that recording conversations without the consent of both parties is illegal in many states.

Active Participant: The Participant as an Observer

Moskos (2008) was interested in examining job-related police behavior and joined the Baltimore police force. During his two years as a police officer, he was able to observe varying instances of police conduct without hiding his true interest and motivation. He found police officers surprisingly tolerant and even encouraging of his academic career. While being a graduate student (at Harvard, of all places) was certainly unusual, Moskos found

that his acceptance was based on much more common factors such as personality and ability to do the job. If participant observation requires you do the job, it is good to do the job well. Police officers judge other officers first and foremost on their ability to do the job. Everything else, including being material for a book, is secondary.

Being a part of a group does not come without its risks. This was documented by Marquart (1986), who was interested in examining officer–inmate interactions to determine the nature of allegations of brutality against inmates in the Texas prison system. Marquart’s participation with prison guards made him very much aware of some of the shortcomings of being an active participant, not just in terms of losing one’s objectivity, but also in term of physical danger. Marquart’s relationship with the inmates changed once he became a guard, and he was no longer able to get vital information from them. However, the fact that many thought he was not a “real guard” may have also led his observations to be manipulated by both guards and inmates.

In addition to the aforementioned disadvantages, active participation may also enjoy some advantages. For example, information may be widely available to the observing researcher, who has access to individuals and material as part of his regular job-related contacts. This can be the case if the observer works for the court administration and enjoys full freedom of looking at records, cases, and specific operations and individuals. It is possible that some individuals in the observed society will remain skeptical as to the real intentions of the researcher and thus may not “play along.” However, these may be the minority rather than the majority of that group. In most cases where the researcher is an active participant, members of the observed society will trust the researcher’s judgment as a member of their group or society. After all, if the researcher is a part of their organization, what reason do they have not to trust him? Another potential advantage of being an active participant has to do with the fact that this method shortens the length of the passive research. The researcher enjoys basic knowledge that is available to all members of the society or organization examined. Thus, the need to prepare ahead of time, both physically and emotionally, is spared.

Active Observer: The Observer as a Participant (Participant Observation)

This type of observation is mostly known as *participant observation*, and it is used by many researchers in its broadest manner, without the differentiation discussed in Figure 21.1. The active observer—being with the group being studied—is the role that most researchers adopt in ethnographic studies.

The researcher accepts some of the obligation and roles that are associated with being a member of the examined group. Such roles may be more difficult in societies and small groups that are hesitant about strangers, those that are on the periphery of society, or in cases where there are visible differences between the researcher and the group observed. Furthermore, some researchers tend to examine societies that have never been investigated. In these cases, the researcher will be very visible due to his appearance, which may not allow him to be accepted and gain access. The participant observer is not, and indeed in most cases *should* not, be a full-fledged member of the group being studied. At its root, participant observation means being physically present among the group being studied. The researcher does not need to fully (or even partially) engage in the work and life of the group being studied. The vast majority of times, the researcher is a fairly passive presence. But of course the engagement of the researcher depends on the specific circumstances of the group being studied.

Access to a group is often mistaken for assimilation. Different researchers may, to varying extents, assimilate into a group's culture, *mores*, and *norms*. But more often than not, it is impossible for a researcher to assimilate into a group because of various insurmountable factors, which can include such personal factors as religion, race, professional training, gender, physical handicap, national origin, or culture. Any attempt by the researcher to be part of the group would be unsuccessful (and perhaps laughable). Simple issues of class and education, and real or perceived economic privilege, which the researcher may wish to believe are minor, may not seem so important. The goal of the researcher need not to be accepted as "one of the boys" (which, as one could imagine, is rather difficult for females). Rather, researchers can be accepted on their own terms as outside observers of the group. There are certain advantages that come from being somewhat outside the phenomenon being studied. For instance, a neutral observer does not have to pick sides among various factions in the group. This could allow for a fuller picture of the group being observed. Members of the group might be more open to a researcher perceived as independent and neutral.

If such a participant-observation role is not possible—and the researcher cannot or does not wish to become undercover and conduct observation under secrecy—active observation is a compromise, with the researcher temporarily becoming a member of the society he or she is interesting in studying. While doing so, the researcher tries to minimize his or her presence as much as possible to minimize any contaminating effects that may result from his or her presence. However, such presence cannot be eliminated entirely. When the researcher assimilates in the society under study by accepting their traditions and conduct, while at the same time minimizing the differences between the subjects and the researcher, he or she becomes a *marginal native*. As such, the researcher becomes an integral part of the group being studied, while maintaining sufficient independence and freedom to carry on the research. In such situations, it is said that the researcher achieved a delicate equilibrium between his or her needs and obligations as a researcher and the expectations of the group in which he or her became a marginal native.

Observation Methods

What and Whom to Observe

Social researchers observe many kinds of human behavior, but normally focus their attention on social behavior or personal behavior within a broader social context. Specifically, researchers will be interested in verbal and nonverbal clues, social interactions, and the presence or absence of specific figures from the social arena. These will be observed by the researcher during the routine activities of individual members of the observed society. These observations require the observer to use a *holistic approach* in observations, as not all acts can be easily understood and interpreted by outsiders.

A researcher observes individual players within the context of their social activities that are relevant to the subject of the research. However, since the researcher may not know which activities and demonstrated behaviors are research-related, observations should be widened to include more incidents and observations that may not (at first) seem to be directly related to the researcher's study. This is done in the spirit of the holistic approach, to suggest that observers be alert to incidents and behavior that may fill missing gaps in the interpretation and understanding of specific forms of behavior observed. Such a need is particularly important in the first passive stages of the observation, when the observer is operating in unknown and unfamiliar territory. As time goes by, the observer becomes more familiar with individuals in the observed groups, and thus can more easily identify the main figures and events that are of relevance to the study. For example, Whyte (1964), when he first entered the field, was not familiar with the main characters and needed to use an informant to guide him through the complex social mosaic of Cornerville and its underworld activity. Only after he became familiar with the turf could Whyte enter places on his own with confidence, observe, and *understand* many forms of behavior. As the study continues, the researcher becomes more familiar with the subjects and their meaningful events. Such familiarity pushes aside passive forms of observation and allows the observer to become more

actively involved with the subjects of the research. That, in turn, enables the researcher to select the information that is more relevant to his or her interests. With that in mind, it is important to note that the researcher will not always be able to observe a wide array of behaviors and events.

Many ethnographic studies that use observations as their main method of data collection are difficult to plan in terms of time and what should be observed. Such realities, unfortunately, make it hard for such researchers to apply for and receive grant funding, which encourages the very clear research questions and strategies that are difficult for the real-world ethnographer. It can be hard, and at times futile, for the researcher to prepare in advance what categories of behavior to document. Any such preparation may result in the researcher forcing the observation into inappropriate, nonvalid, or prejudicial categories. Therefore, the first few hours, days, and weeks of an observation are usually characterized by a more thorough documentation of observed details. Some details may turn out to be redundant, whereas others that may have seemed to be redundant can turn out to be extremely useful or might be key to an understanding of unusual and unexpected behaviors. Only a thorough observation and documentation can sharpen the images received, allowing for a better picture of the realities being observed. The importance of writing down notes—and finding the time and energy to do so after a long day's research—cannot be stressed enough. No matter how significant an event or detail seems at the time, if you do not write it down, you will not remember it. It is as if it never happened. By the time it comes to writing the final report, an article, or even a book, years may have passed. Detailed, extensive, and complete note-taking is of course both essential and impossible. But you must make the greatest effort to write as much and as often as possible. Such thorough initial documentation can help the researcher later facilitate meaningful and valid categories that can lead to future observations, breakthroughs, and discovery of interrelated variables.

Such initial documentation was essential to initiate a large-scale Israeli study of violence against medical and paramedical staff in general emergency rooms. The researchers had to visit emergency rooms during different hours of the day for several weeks to gain enough information and insight on the emergency-room dynamic. This information later guided them in phrasing survey items that guided the second stage of the observation (Landau & Bendalak, 2008). Thinking back to a previous analogy used in this book, an observer points his camera in a desired direction and starts taking as many pictures as he possibly can. Each picture improves his aim and focus slightly, until he can clearly focus on the exact scene he wishes to document. A wedding photographer, for example, will begin by taking multiple shots of guests and then will reduce the shots to focus on the main figures in the event. His initial work is much more difficult, but as he grows more familiar with the individuals who surround him, he is required to use fewer photos and can focus on the more important individuals aside from the bride and groom. The exact same procedure is implemented with observations. All field notes do not turn into published articles, and may not even be included in the final research report; however, some will. More work and more coverage during the initial stages of observation help researchers pick up whatever information they can get their hands on. After time passes, less documentation is needed as the observer identifies the main categories of interest to best serve his research. Focusing on these categories requires less time and more focus. With luck, this in turn leads to more accurate observations and insights. Thus, at the initial stages of observation, the researcher is advised to observe everything and everyone.

This will later enable the researcher to perfect the observations and turn his or her attention to the most relevant pieces of information.

How to Observe

The question of how to observe is comprised of three basic questions:

1. What is the level of reaction the researcher is willing to tolerate?
2. What is the timing of the observations?
3. How will the documentation of the observation be performed?

Each of these questions is important to the discussion of “how to observe,” as they require the researcher to prepare ahead of time and even anticipate some potential limitations that he or she may encounter during observation.

The first question deals with the level of engagement the researcher is ready to use and the corresponding reaction he or she can experience without its affecting the results of the study. This refers to the practical problem of research involvement in the life of research subjects, which is usually associated with participant observations (i.e., pure participant, active participant, and active observer) where the researcher takes an active role in the lives of subjects while reducing their reaction to the researcher as a stranger. However, such concerns are less relevant with complete observations, where there is minimal if any interaction between the researcher and the observed group. The intensity of the observation and interaction greatly depends on how big the observed group is. It can be logically assumed that higher and more intensive levels of interaction are associated with smaller groups rather than a large and complex society. To better understand this, think of a dinner party with five guests versus a dinner party with twenty-five guests. Where will you receive more attention from the people who dine with you? With five guests, of course. Because such an environment is more intimate, your role and presence as an individual will matter more. Consider the example of Jacobs’s (1998) study on crack dealers. Jacobs’s involvement was dangerous, and in dealing repeatedly with violent offenders, one of his informants mugged him at gunpoint. This is one of the risks one takes when entering a deviant subculture as pure observer, but such research can also be quietly thrilling—in a good way—something often lacking in complete observation.

The second question considers how fieldwork differs from laboratory conditions. Researchers are responsible for setting time lines, but researchers engaged in social-observation research can be dependent on their subjects and the time line provided to them. Whyte (1964)—because of timing and the need to be present—eventually had to leave the comfort of his Harvard dorm to live with an Italian family in Cornerville. Many times, Whyte would schedule meetings with people who did not show up. Other times, Whyte would hear that he had missed some important conversations or events that might have been significant to his study. As a result, he decided it would be better simply to move to the area. Another example is Jacobs’s (1998) aforementioned study of drug dealers. Jacobs describes the phone calls that came in from informants at all times of day and night, demanding his immediate attention and presence.

In observations, timing can be everything. Researchers can spend hours, days, and even months without observing any significant events. So, researchers need to make themselves available when such events do occur. The observer will have to decide which events are

worth capturing and which events, being of less significance, can be skipped. Keep in mind that the perceived significance of an event may differ greatly between the researchers and those people being observed.

People from the group being studied will often try to assist the researcher by pointing out events of note. While such assistance can at times be essential, at other times, the researcher is studying a phenomenon that is only tangentially related to what is perceived by others to be the “action.” For instance, researchers of police culture have often noted that officers tend to apologize for a “slow night” (Punch, 1979). But this is based on the assumption that the participant observer wants to see what *police* believe to be the exciting parts of the job (like racing to calls in progress with lights flashing and siren blaring). In reality, as Moskos (2008) shows, some of the most significant observational data are gathered during slow periods late at night, when officers are bored and more inclined to speak freely. Of course, if one is specifically looking for interactions between the police and public, actually observing such interactions is essential. But if one wishes to *understand* such interactions, hearing an officer talk about it before racing to the next call is equally if not more important.

Many times, researchers will create detailed tables of events and their time frames, where the activities of the individuals in the observed group are carefully detailed. These tables will allow the researcher to later identify specific events and activities of interest. Such tables will also allow researchers to manage their observation more efficiently. These tables not only assist the researcher in monitoring time and identifying events, they also provide systematic documentation.

The third and last question—How will the documentation of the observation be performed?—dictates how the researcher documents the observations. A thorough, clear, and consistent documentation of observed events is essential for ensuring reliability. Sometimes, such documentation may not be possible if situations prevent the luxury of overtly writing field notes on scene. Other times, taking notes may create a distraction to other members of the observed group or even become dangerous for the researcher. This last point is well documented by Conover (2001), when he was unable to document his observations promptly and used codes in his guard notebook that would later help him in writing his observations. Once he published his work, he received many threats. Moskos (2008), on the other hand, was aided by the police requirement to carry pen and paper. Officers occasionally made sure he wrote something interesting down. Moskos received no threats and remained close to many of the officers he studied long after his book was complete. Being known as person who writes down a lot of notes can be a great aid in data collection. Certainly, such a system is feasible only when one is overt about one’s research goals.

When immediate documentation is not possible, the researcher must rely on memory or surreptitious trips to the bathroom. Generally, brief notes are taken on the scene and then expanded on at the end of each research day. In effect, the notes from the scene are little more than a mnemonic device. When this is done, important information is required to prompt accurate memories later. For example, the researcher is advised to include information about specific circumstances—what he or she thought and felt at that particular moment. Quotes can also be useful, in part not to lose the flavor of the speech style, but also because a direct quote may better trigger accurate and detailed memories of the moment. These add to the reliability of the reports presented to others. It is also important that data is recorded in a way that makes the chronology clear and allows the data to be placed in categories for filing and easier retrieval.

Summary

Many times, researchers interested in criminology and criminal justice research seek to obtain in-depth understanding of events documented by official statistics. Other times, they may want to understand how an organization, such as a police department or prison, operates. And there are studies that aim to evaluate a process or introduce the dynamic of an unknown group or deviant behavior. Many classic studies in criminology aimed to explore and reveal the mysteries of the criminal underworld, such as behavioral patterns of professional thieves (Sutherland, 1936) and drug dealers (Hobbs, 1995). No matter what the researchers' motives and goals are, they all share the same overall mode of observation for data collection.

Depending on the type of observation, using such methods, researchers can obtain better insight into the society, group, or culture of study. However, depending on the type of observation used, researchers are provided with different information and may be exposed to varying levels of risk. Observations usually require more time and commitment from the researcher than do other modes of data collection, such as surveys. Observations vary in scope, length, and the method the researcher uses to enter the field. Some researchers will never enter the field and will use the complete pure observation method. Others will enter the field as participants, taking upon themselves the role of an equal member of the society they examine.

Although observations are a wonderful method to collect in-depth data and gain insight, many criticize these methods on the grounds that a researcher involved with research subjects can no longer remain objective. When this happens, the researcher is said to have *gone native*, which means the researcher over identifies with the research subjects to the point where the researcher loses the focus of the study. Of course, a desire to remain objective could come at the expense of true understanding.

Observation methods will be determined by the research topic and the group the researcher is interested in observing. Those facts will dictate *what* and *who* the researcher observes, and *how* and *when* the groups should be observed. Because the researcher can be limited by his or her inability to observe everything at once, sampling of events and specific individuals from the observed groups can be essential. This requires the researcher to complete some very intensive observations to provide the initial raw material from which he or she will later pick and choose. Many times, the method of observation will be determined by the objective limitations of the actual observation and the role the observer plays in the studied group. Level of intensity and tolerance to reactions from members of the group, timing and availability, and the ability to document are important aspects of how to observe.

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