

Chapter 14 Conducting a Good Observation

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*Essential Skills for the Qualitative
Researcher*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Skill

Develop the skill of conducting a good observation.

Why the Skill Is Important

Observations may be an ideal form of qualitative data when individuals cannot express themselves in interviews, when they are unable or unwilling to be interviewed, and when the qualitative inquirer can actually visit the site where the central phenomenon is being expressed or talked about. Observations can also be a good adjunct to interviewing because they enable a researcher to compare the codes and themes from the observation with findings from the interviews. This triangulation of data sources is important to check the accuracy of the interpretations made by the researcher. Observations can also yield detailed information that may not be divulged during discussions or in written documents. Much more has been written about interviewing and using focus groups, so less is typically known about how to conduct a good observation. Still, as you add it to your sources of qualitative information to collect, you need to know the type of observing you will do, how you go about the process of observing and recording information, and the challenges in conducting a good observation.

Observation as a Developed Skill

Observation is one of the key tools for collecting data in qualitative research. I see it as a skill that can be developed. I think about individuals and occupational groups that are good at observing. Police and private detectives come to mind; they often have highly developed observational skills. As police ride in their cruisers, they become highly proficient at watching in all directions, noticing unusual behavior, and seeing accidents that have just occurred. My cousin's husband was a private detective for many years. He talks about how he observed the veins popping out on the necks of individuals he was interrogating to determine whether they were telling the truth. Once, as I sat on the porch of a motel looking out at Washington, D.C., he said to me, "Did you see that?" A car had just careened off the road and up onto the sidewalk about a block away. He had both "heard" and "seen" the accident before I had any indication that it had occurred. Children also come to mind as good observers. My wife tells me that in the garden at the elementary school where she is master gardener, the children can spot a bug on a leaf much more quickly than can their parents. Children often have a keen sense for observing.

Observation has long been a primary form of data collection for qualitative researchers. It is the act of noting a phenomenon in the field through the five senses of the observer, often with an instrument, and recording it for scientific purposes (Angrosino, 2007). The observations are based on finding a place or site where you can learn about your central phenomenon. You may observe and note the physical setting, participants, activities, interactions, and conversations, as well as your own behaviors during the observation. Good observers use all of their senses, including sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. When you observe, it is difficult to write down everything you see. Typically, qualitative observers start with broad observations and then narrow their view to information that will answer their research questions.

The Nature of Observing

According to Hatch (2002), “the goal of observation is to understand the culture, the setting, or social phenomenon being studied from the perspectives of the participants” (p. 72). **Observing** involves locating a site, developing a protocol for recording information, focusing in on events, looking for activities that help inform the central phenomenon, determining the appropriate role as an observer, recording “descriptive” and “reflective” **field notes** on the observation protocol, and slowly withdrawing from the site by respecting and thanking those observed for their time and your presence at the site. These components can flow into a series of steps that I would recommend.

Steps in the Process of Observing

Step 1: Select the Research Site

Decide on and select a *site* where you can best understand your central phenomenon. Obtain the required permissions needed to gain access to the site. Several levels of permissions might be needed, and gatekeepers can help with this process.

Step 2: Develop the Observational Protocol

Design an observational *protocol* as a method for recording observational notes in the field. Include in this protocol both “descriptive” (e.g., notes about what happened) and “reflective” (i.e., notes about your experiences, hunches, and learnings) notes. Make sure to provide appropriate identification information on the protocol, such as the date, place, and time of observation (Angrosino, 2007). In [Figure 14.1](#), I provide a general example of the types of information that would go into an observational protocol.

In [Figure 14.2](#), I illustrate an observational protocol using one I developed when I observed a visiting scholar (Professor Harry Wolcott) come to my class and make a presentation about qualitative research. You can see in this example both “descriptive” and “reflective” notes as well as a drawing of the classroom site.

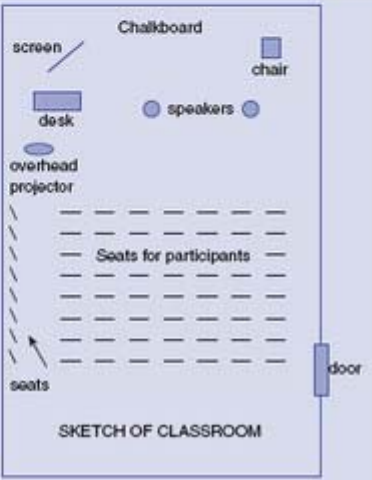
Step 3: Focus the Observation

At the site, quietly observe without writing for a few minutes. Think about what catches your attention. Look at the ordinary and the unordinary. Take in the entire scene. There will be much in the environment to see. Then, *focus* in on one aspect that will help you understand your central research question and the central phenomenon. I consider this starting broadly and then zooming in on one aspect. Start with some aspect that is not complicated or complex, but simple.

Figure 14.1 A General Model for an Observational Protocol

Header: Time, Place, Observer	
Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State here the questions you will ask yourself Often these are your sub-questions They may also include chronologies You can set times as well Basically, you are describing what you see 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> These are notes for yourself They may include what problems/highlights you are experiencing as you observe They could also be preliminary themes — your first pass at what you are learning as you observe

Figure 14.2 A Sample Observation Protocol Including Descriptive and Reflective Notes

Length of Activity: 90 Minutes	
Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes
General: What are the experiences of graduate students as they learn qualitative research in the classroom?	
See classroom layout and comments about physical setting at the bottom of this page.	<i>Overhead with flaps: I wonder if the back of the room was able to read it.</i>
Approximately 5:17 p.m., Dr. Creswell enters the filled room, introduces Dr. Wolcott. Class members seem relieved.	<i>Overhead projector not plugged in at the beginning of the class: I wonder if this was a distraction (when it took extra time to plug it in).</i>
Dr. Creswell gives brief background of guest, concentrating on his international experiences; features a comment about the educational ethnography "The Man in the Principals Office."	<i>Lateness of the arrival of Drs. Creswell and Wolcott: Students seemed a bit anxious. Maybe it had to do with the change in starting time to 5 p.m. (some may have had 6:30 classes or appointments to get to).</i>
Dr. Wolcott begins by telling the class he now writes out educational ethnography and highlights this primary occupation by mentioning two books: <i>Transferring Qualitative Data</i> and <i>The Art of Fieldwork</i> .	<i>Drs. Creswell and Wolcott seem to have a good rapport between them, judging from many short exchanges that they had.</i>
While Dr. Wolcott begins his presentation by apologizing for his weary voice (due to talking all day, apparently), Dr. Creswell leaves the classroom to retrieve the guest's overhead transparencies.	 <p>SKETCH OF CLASSROOM</p>
<p>Seemed to be three parts to this activity:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) the speaker's challenge to the class of detecting pure ethnographical methodologies, (2) the speaker's presentation of the "tree" that portrays various strategies and substrategies for qualitative research in education, and (3) the relaxed "elder statesman" fielding class questions, primarily about students' potential research projects and prior studies Dr. Wolcott had written. 	
The first question was "How do you look at qualitative research?" followed by "How does ethnography fit in?"	

Source: Creswell (2013).

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Step 4: Determine Your Role

Determine what observer role you will assume. This role can range from that of a complete participant (going native) to that of a complete observer. Consider also how your role may change

during the observation. I especially like the procedure of being an outsider initially, followed by becoming an insider over time. There are four types of observational roles that you can assume:

- Complete participant: The researcher is fully engaged with the people he or she is observing. This may help greater rapport with people being observed (Angrosino, 2007).
- Participant as observer: The researcher is participating in the activity at the site. The participant role is more salient than the researcher role. This may help the researcher gain insider views and subjective data. However, it may be distractive for the researcher to record data when he or she is integrated into the activity.
- Nonparticipant/observer as participant: The researcher is an outsider of the group under study, watching and taking field notes from a distance. He or she can record data without direct involvement with activity or people.
- Complete observer: The researcher simply observes without attracting notice. It may require sitting at the back of a room or in a spot where he or she cannot be easily noticed. The researcher does not say anything but simply records field notes.

Step 5: Record Field Notes

Record what you are observing on your observational protocol. This is called recording *field notes*. What do you record? First consider the “descriptive” side of your observational protocol. Here are some options (and often multiple approaches are used), and you might place prompts down the page under the “descriptive” side of your protocol to reflect the following:

- Write down prompts that relate to the five senses: what you see, what you hear, what you touch (literally), what you taste, what you smell. You might record what you “feel” or the movement going on around you.
- Develop a chronology of what happens. You can indicate the times when events occur by looking at your watch. This chronology simply lists the events in the order in which they occur.
- Use your sub-questions as a guide and list them down the page. While in interviews we ask people to respond to our questions; in observations, on the other hand, we ask ourselves the questions, and then answer them by recording what we observe in response to these questions.
- Draw a picture of the setting.
- Write a story about what you see happening in terms of your central phenomenon. This approach places you one step further toward writing your narrative.
- On the “reflective” side of your observation protocol, consider taking notes about any problems, issues, and concerns you have about observing and taking field notes. These notes may become important in writing about your methods, ethical issues, and limitations in your final report. Also consider listing themes—these are the broader constructs you will derive as you analyze qualitative data. They are phrased as two- to four-word labels, and they help us organize the narratives we will write. They become the headings in our qualitative report in the “findings” section.

Step 6: Slowly Withdraw

After observing, *slowly withdraw* from the site, thanking the participants for their time and letting them know, if they ask, that they will receive an abstract of the summary of the findings in the study (obtain their e-mail addresses to send this).

Additional Helpful Guidelines for Observing

Here are some helpful guidelines for writing your “descriptive” and “reflective” notes:

- Try to capture detail. Writing in a detailed way is not easy and it takes practice.
- If you have time, write in complete sentences. If time is limited (after all, you do not want to disturb the site too much), take brief notes, and immediately following the observation, sit down and write out your notes in a more complete fashion.
- Realize that you can talk to participants in the setting if they will engage you. In this way you can record conversation in your field notes. This dialogue can be a useful way to bring quotes into your final narrative.
- Following your observation, write up your “descriptive” notes into a narrative—a paragraph or two—that describes what you saw and perhaps some potential larger themes that emerge from your observation. In qualitative research, the activities of data collection, data analysis, and interpretation (written narrative) often occur simultaneously, and they are not separated activities as is often the case in *quantitative* research.

Challenges in Observing

Observing takes patience and being able to anticipate and adjust to several challenges that will likely arise during the observational period. For beginning researchers, a common reaction is to be overwhelmed by the amount of information available at the observational site. It is helpful to begin observing by simply looking around, without taking notes. After a while, you need to focus your observation on activities, people, and events that help you explore your central phenomenon. Also, new researchers struggle with the dual tasks of observing and taking notes. I find it helpful to take notes in short phrases, and then, after leaving the observational situation, to spend time recording longer field notes and filling in details. Sometimes new researchers encounter people who do not like being observed. In this situation, I move to a different place in the room and shift my observation to another person or event. New qualitative inquirers need to be reminded to take detailed notes so that complete sentences can be transferred from the field notes directly into the qualitative report. Beginning researchers are often curious about whether they can observe in a public space without obtaining the consent of individuals. I see no problem with this as long as the space is truly public and my observations would not disrupt the activities going on.

New researchers should be aware of the potential deception of people being observed (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), and, if possible, have the participants complete an informed consent form. Studies may involve different degrees of deception. At one end is minor deception that arises when we do not share all of the details with participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2011). For example, not sharing the full details of our conceptual framework or assumptions might be considered a minor form of deception. A similar form arises if the purpose of inquiry evolves throughout the study. Of course, it also might be considered sparing participants unnecessary details. At the other end, deception can be more intentional, such as misleading participants about the true intent of the study. This form of deception is particularly relevant to observations. Often, when individuals know they are being observed, they change their behavior. For example, when researchers are focused on a sensitive topic, such as sexist interactions, individuals might behave differently if they are aware of the true focus. As Rossman and Rallis (2012) noted, the potential benefit of the study might outweigh the need to disclose the true purpose. However, before engaging in this form of deception (i.e., assuming a covert role as a researcher), I recommend you carefully consider the ethical implications and consult with experienced

researchers to determine whether deception is worth the risk. In addition, it will be necessary to describe your plans and rationale for deception in the institutional review board submission.

Figure 14.3 A Checklist for Conducting an Observation

<input type="checkbox"/> Did you gain permission to study the site?
<input type="checkbox"/> Do you know your role as an observer?
<input type="checkbox"/> Do you have a means for recording your observation—an observational protocol?
<input type="checkbox"/> Do you know what you will observe first?
<input type="checkbox"/> Will you enter and leave the site slowly, so as to not disturb the setting?
<input type="checkbox"/> Will you make multiple observations over time?
<input type="checkbox"/> Will you develop rapport with individuals at the site?
<input type="checkbox"/> Will your observations change from broad to narrow during your observation?
<input type="checkbox"/> Will you take limited notes at first?
<input type="checkbox"/> Will you take both descriptive as well as reflective notes?
<input type="checkbox"/> Will you describe in complete sentences so that you have detailed field notes?
<input type="checkbox"/> Did you thank your participants at the site?
<input type="checkbox"/> Did you refrain from intentionally deceiving participants during the observation?

Observation Checklist

Figure 14.3 is a checklist you might use to make sure that all parts of your observation are completed.

Summary

Observations are an important qualitative source of data collection, and it is especially helpful to collect data when individuals are unable or unwilling to be interviewed and when detailed information about the central phenomenon needs to be collected. Observing is the process of gathering unstructured, open-ended, firsthand information by watching people and places at a research site. It involves the steps of selecting a site, developing a protocol or instrument for recording information, starting slowly by taking in the scene and then focusing on information helpful in exploring your central phenomenon, assuming one or more observational roles, recording information as descriptive and reflective notes, and then slowly redrawing from the site. Observing can be challenging and overwhelming in terms of the amount of information, the dual tasks of writing and observing, the need to write detailed notes, and the use of observing public spaces and the potential for deceiving people.

Activity

I recommend that you practice conducting an observation. You might try the following. To learn how to observe, I have new researchers identify a public setting where they can practice applying an observational protocol and recording field notes. My favorite site is the campus “climbing wall,” where I ask that students in my class simply observe individuals climbing. This seems like a physical activity to which many people can relate. I first have students design an observational protocol. They then go to the climbing wall in the activity center and receive permission to observe. They start slowly and then focus on one aspect of the climbing experience. They start taking field notes. I remind them to have conversations with climbers. Sometimes my students will actually become participants and put on the climbing straps and practice climbing. After about half an hour, they conclude their

observation. They type up their field notes and share them with other individuals in the class. This activity introduces many of the challenges facing observers that I have identified, such as observing people who may not want to be observed, learning how to write detailed notes, becoming overwhelmed by the amount of activity going on in a high-stimulus environment, and balancing observing with note taking.

Further Resources

Angrosino, M. V. (2007). *Doing ethnographic and observational research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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