UNIT 12 OBSERVATION METHOD

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12.0 INTRODUCTION

Being observed and observing others are central aspects of our lives. We observe events, environment and people around us all the time for various reasons. However, everyday observation is random in nature as compared to scientific observation which is focused, objective and systematic. Observation method is a qualitative research method which relies on physically observed phenomenon. It is integral to Ethnography and is often referred to as its primary research tool. The method is based on the assumption that one can learn a great deal about the world by just careful observation. It provides an opportunity to study people in real life situations and involves the process of detailed, in-depth description of everyday life and practice.

In this unit, we shall discuss various aspects related to Observation Method. We shall discuss the characteristics and uses of this method and outline the types of observation including participant and non-participant observation. We shall also look at the process of observation which largely includes selection of a group, documentation, analysis and interpretation but may vary according to the focus and objectives of a study.

12.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the characteristics of observation method;
12.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF OBSERVATION METHOD

Observation method is used to study select issues, cases, or events in depth in order to obtain rich contextual details of an issue under study. In contrast with survey method which explores ‘what’ of an issue, this method explores questions of ‘why’ and ‘how’ in a systematic way and has been found more useful to study the nature of human behaviour, social conditions and characteristics of people. Observation is central to and one of the oldest forms of Ethnographic research methods and as stated earlier, is based on the assumption that one can learn a great deal about the world by just careful observation. Let us try to understand the concept of ethnography first.

Ethnography

The term Ethnography is often used interchangeably for all qualitative research, methodology or a research tool. Ethnography has been defined as “a systematic description of social group and its way of life”, the study and systematic recording of human cultures, and a descriptive work produced from such research. It has also been referred as ‘a scientific description of the races of mankind’. Listening, watching and interacting are central to ethnography as people go about their lives. A key principle of ethnographic work is ‘holism’ which involves that the group or culture must be understood as whole system and not as isolated parts. “The researcher’s task is to not to explain the apparent oddities but to look for the internal consistency that weaves together - from an insider point of view” (Priest, 2010).

According to Brennen (2013) “for some researchers ethnography means the on-site study of foreign cultures over an extended period of time, while others suggest that ethnography can be done locally within a researcher’s culture and it need not take years to complete, as long as it helps us to understand a specific group, community or culture”. With the advent of the Internet, Ethnography is also used in virtual spaces in which the groups and communities using chat rooms, blogs and are observed systematically.

Drawing upon the principles of ethnography, observation is a direct method of collecting data in which one or more persons observe some real life situations and record them. It is used to analyse the ‘overt behaviour of people in controlled and uncontrolled situations’. It enables the researcher to record specific activities or behaviour at the time of occurrence in the natural setting and provide data rich in detail and subtlety. According to Berger (2000), the method is useful to study what “people actually do rather than what they say they do”.

According to Wimmer and Dominick (2003) observation method was rarely used in mass media research before 1980. Lowry (1979) reported that only 2-3 percent of the articles published in journalism and broadcasting journals used this technique. Recently, however, observation is being extensively used in mass communication research, mostly in combination with other research methods.
Activity-1

Go through some journals in mass communication and identify the studies which have used Observation as a research method. Examine the type of subjects explored in these studies.

12.2.1 Strengths

The method relies on ‘physically observed phenomenon’ - this means that it provides direct and in-depth experience which leads to useful insights on the issue under study. When combined with some training and a little common sense, the behaviour of the subjects can be recorded. The context in which certain behaviours take place can also be understood and recorded. The range of information collected will be much wider since you will be observing different people doing different activities at the same time. According to Reddi & Singh (2003), “it also provides useful insights in the initial stages of needs assessment and development of audience profiles and in determining what other research methods need to be used. The findings can open certain critical areas of enquiry for further study”.

12.2.2 Limitations

Observation method has some limitations as well. If the subject knows that s/he is being observed, s/he may put on an artificial behaviour. The presence of researcher is likely to change the group dynamics and how people react. If the problem under study requires several observers, frequent visits or extended stay in the study area, the expenses may increase. One may get overwhelmed with their problems in the study area and forget to record observations about its causes, impact etc. Moreover, the findings are relevant for a particular group, section or area in which the study has been undertaken and may not be applicable for other groups/sections/areas.

Unless the events are recorded accurately on a regular basis, much of their value might be lost. The method is good in observing what is going on but of little help in knowing the past and private behaviour of the respondents. It can generate mistaken conclusions based on the interpretation of the situation. The observer may not fully know what group members really think or how they react in his/ her absence. The method is less effective in collecting information about personal beliefs, feelings, opinions, motivations and expectations, unless relevant questions are asked. The values, attitudes, and prejudices of the researcher may affect her objectivity leading to bias in the findings. There is lack of control and quantification.

Wimmer and Dominick argue that if the researcher is concerned with external validity then observation method may not be an appropriate choice. Reddi & Singh (2003) further caution that,” choosing methods is a process of ‘matching’ which should be in relation to the questions you want to answer, the resources and time available to you and also matching with your skills, training and experience”. Thus observation method has some inherent limitations, and may not be an appropriate technique for every research question and as a researcher you need to take a great deal of care while using the method. Quite often, observation is combined with other research methods to obtain a wider and fuller perspective of the situation.
Check Your Progress: 1

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answers.
2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1) List five strengths of Observation method.
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2) List five limitations of Observation method.
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12.3 TYPES OF OBSERVATION

Observations have been variously classified as Structured and Unstructured Observation; Overt and Covert observation; Participant Observation and Non-Participant Observation; among others.

Structured observation as the name suggests, are formal in nature and record information in a systematic manner. In this type of observation, the researcher generally knows the problem and collects detailed information on specific categories of behaviour.

Unstructured observations are often exploratory in nature in which the researcher records and examines the available information. The researcher is generally an unobtrusive observer who strives to remain invisible. This type of observation is more useful at the initial stages of research in identifying issues in problem and for developing hypotheses.

Overt Observation: When the subjects of observation are informed that they are being observed, it constitutes overt observation.

Covert Observation: If the subjects are not aware of being observed, then it constitutes 'covert observation'. This type of observation has ethical implications which we shall discuss in detail later in this unit.

Berger (2000) classified observers as Observer as Non-Participant (outsider) and Participant as observer (insider). These categories of observers were expanded by Brennen (2013) to include: complete observer, observer as participant, participant as observer, and complete participant. All these categories can be considered in two broad classifications of Participant and Non-participant observation as discussed below.
12.3.1 Non-Participant Observation

In Non-participant observation, the researcher observes a situation or a phenomenon from a distance without being part of the group or culture being studied. S/he simply observes and records what is going on and his/her presence is not felt by the group. In non-participant observation, the subjects of research may/may not be aware that they are being observed. Brennen terms this type of observer as Complete Observer.

**Complete observer:** who observes at a distance and has no interaction with people, group or community. The subjects being observed may or may not know that they are being observed. The observation is undertaken by use of one-way glass mirror, binoculars, video cameras strategically placed around the site. Thus this non-participant observer uses different form of media for observation and may watch and analyse the recordings off-site at a later date and stage. Due to advent of technological tools, this form of observation is applied with the help of digital media.

12.3.2 Participant Observation

In Participant Observation, the researcher participates in the activities of the community being studied as a member of the culture and the community is aware of his/her presence for observation. As per the categorisation of Brennen, this type of observer can be of two types: observer as participant and participant as observer.

**Observer as participant:** The observer in this category is present on-site but maintains a distance from those being observed. S/he does not stay with the community and has limited interaction with the community members. S/he does not actively participate in their activities and takes an outsider position in which s/he documents what was observed rather than what was experienced by him/her.

**Participant as observer:** Participant as observer is fully integrated into the culture being studied- s/he lives with the community and participates in their activities, rituals and practices etc. S/he documents observations as well as experiences. Thus s/he takes an insider position to understand the meanings of the actions being undertaken by the community members.

‘Going Native’

In addition to above there is one more category of observer who is termed as Complete Participant. The complete participant gets fully integrated with the group, culture, or organisation s/he studies. S/he adopts the cultural values, interests and beliefs being followed by the community. In the process, s/he becomes so identified with the group that s/he loses objectivity and abandons the research project midway thus “goes native”. The term ‘going native’ means that the person rejects the analytical role as researcher and becomes a member of the group or community s/he had planned to study. Jorgensen argues (in Brennen), “if such researcher returns to the project even after ‘going native’ s/he is likely to get much richer and indepth information about the group or community s/he was earlier studying.”
Check Your Progress: 2

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answers.
2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1) Among various types of observers, which in your view is most effective and why?

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2) What does the expression ‘Going native’ mean in research?

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12.4 PROCESS OF OBSERVATION

Observation is considered to be one of the simplest research methods for collecting data and can take place in informal as well as formal settings. However, like other research methods, it also requires adequate planning, proper implementation and systematic analysis. It does not require a formal hypothesis like various quantitative methods, but the researcher does need to have some broad understanding of the issues involved. At the planning stage itself, the researcher needs to define the scope of observation and ascertain the type of observation discussed in sub-section 12.3.2 of this unit. S/he also needs to identify the specific activities or units of behaviour to be observed and the likely duration of observation period. Further, the permission of the individual or group to be studied will have to be taken. Taking above factors in view, a basic plan of investigation and guidelines will have to be prepared.

12.4.1 Selection of Group

The selection of group or community will flow from the research objectives and questions - it could be a village or a tribal community or people working in a Community Radio Station (CRS) or in the editorial section of a newspaper organisation.

Gaining access to a group or community being studied is an important part of the research process. The researcher may find it difficult to gain access to a group, culture or organisation unless s/he knows someone in the group or is introduced to them. It is important that the presence of observer is acceptable to the group and rapport is built with them. Researchers often rely heavily on individuals who are willing to devote time and explain what is going on. However, it is possible that the information provided by such an informant may be slanted, biased or incomplete. Therefore, as researcher, you should have access to a wide spectrum of people and whenever in doubt you should seek clarity and verify the information obtained.
12.4.2 What to Observe?

When you go to the field you may record many things happening around you but all these activities may not be relevant for the study. As the observation progresses the objectives and research questions will help to place your observations in a context.

The following quote from Berger (2000) reveals a wide range of activities for Observation:

- Where do people do what they do?
- What common ideas and background knowledge do people have?
- What do people do?
- What does what to whom?
- Who originates action, who reacts and how do they react?
- Why do they do what they do?
- When (and how often) do they do what they do?
- How do they do what they do?
- How long they do what they do?  
  Berger, 2000

Let us try to understand the process of observation with an example. Suppose, you want to study the working of a Community Radio Station (CRS), you need to select a CRS which should be reasonably representative of other CRSs. Like other research methods, you will study available literature and relevant documents, reports etc. on CRS in general and the CSR selected for the study in particular. This will create a broader picture in your mind and help to identify the specific areas you plan to focus upon in your observation. Some of these areas may pertain to different aspects of programming, production or management of the CRS. Once the focus and objectives of the study have been finalised, then you will have to outline specific research questions and select appropriate research methods and tools. For example, for observing various production or management related activities at the CRS some of the following questions may be kept in view:

- What is being done at the CRS and in which order?
- How do people working in the CRS relate with each other?
- Who seems to be in charge and decision maker?
- What is the process of taking decisions?
- What kind of local talent is involved in the CRS?
- How is the programming undertaken at the CRS?
- What type of management practices are being followed in the CRS?
- What explanations people offer for their actions?

Based on the issues identified during observation, you may further explore them using different research methods and tools. For example you may conduct indepth interviews on the personnel working in the CRS and obtain detailed information on specific aspects. Similarly, the responses given by those working in CRS can be examined. You may use survey method to obtain audience feedback on the type of programming and presentation of the CRS. From the findings obtained
from multiple research tools and techniques, you can create a complete picture of the CRS under study. While it is true that the findings of a single CRS may not be generalised for other CRSs in statistical sense, but will hold a great deal of value as they will throw light on issues and concerns relevant for other CRS as well.

12.4.3 Documentation

The above analysis is indicative of the complexity of field experience. It reveals that you will observe a lot happening around you and relevant information needs to be recorded and documented. Unless the observations are recorded in a systematic manner, much of their value may get lost and the information may become unwieldy at the time of writing. Thus it is important to work out an economical way or recording the information. For documentation, some of the following tools are generally used during observation:

- Field notes
- Daily diary
- Audio-video recordings
- Photographs

**Field Notes:** Field notes are one of the most common ways of recording information during data collection. These are random in nature about the people observed, and their various engagements etc. The observer records not only what happened and what was said but also ‘personal impressions, feelings and interpretations of what was observed’. According to Wimmer and Dominick, a general procedure is to separate personal opinions from the descriptive narrative by enclosing in brackets. However, constantly taking notes in the presence of those being observed can make them self conscious and uneasy. It is useful to take brief notes when it attracts a minimum attention and expanded at a later stage. Sometimes field notes are jotted down in a hurried manner and may not be legible. It is desirable to transfer these notes in computer or files at the end of day while events and context are still fresh in mind. Memory is one of the best skills for any field researcher as you need to recall information and write everything as soon as possible. The field notes need to be read and reviewed periodically to assess what more needs to be observed.

**Daily Diary:** Unlike field notes which are random in nature, daily diary is more systematic with specific heads and sub-heads. It is specifically developed in the light of the research objectives and questions which the observation method aims to achieve. The construction of a daily diary is an important step in observation as it helps to arrange raw field data in an orderly format to enable systematic retrieval at a later stage. What you will record/observe will vary from one study to another nonetheless; some of the following are likely to be applicable for most of the studies:

- Location/s of the observation
- Date/s and time of observation
- The people met - their age, occupation, etc.
- The events, activities and rituals observed
- The information channels available in the community
- Types of interaction: verbal/non-verbal
It is useful to develop themes emerging from the field for recording as according to Priest (2010), if data is classified on certain pre-determined categories, it may impose researcher’s worldview on the data. Instead it is useful to allow the thematic categories to emerge from the actual data being analysed by adding, eliminating or refining categories as necessary.

**Audio-Video Recording:** Audio-video recordings are extensively used in field research as well as in observation method. Generally, a one-way vision screen and mirrors are used which allows the observer to see the subject but prevents the subject from seeing the observer. Video recording has also been extensively used during observations, but as earlier discussed, the presence of camera may lead some people to put on certain behaviour and distract attention of the respondents. Further, recordings tend to add extra work to the project as these have to be catalogued, indexed and transcribed. The issues relating to the use of audio-video recording have been dealt with in detail in Unit 10 of this block and are pertinent in observation method too. Thus, as researchers you will have to weigh the pros and cons of using your recording tool. There are ethical issues with audio/video recordings, these are discussed later in this unit in section 12.5.

**Photographs:** Photographs provide a wealth of rich information from the field and have always been used during data collection. Based on the old adage that ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ and ‘seeing is believing’, photographs provide rich evidence to the issues discussed thus establish credibility. Lately, due to the increased access of smartphones, photographs have emerged as important tool of recording. Moreover, unlike audio-video recording, photographs do not require lengthy processes of transcription and translation but only crisp and pertinent captions. However, before taking photographs of the subject, event or place, prior permission of the concerned need to be taken. Further, there should be a judicious balance in using photographs which should not be used indiscriminately as substitute for real indepth research work.

### 12.4.4 Duration

One of the important aspects of observation method is the duration - how long does the group or community have to be observed and when to ‘exit’ from the field. The initial studies using observation method were generally conducted for extended periods - from few months to years and it was considered, that the longer duration, the better the study. However, lately, studies of shorter duration are also being undertaken using observation method. There is no rule of thumb as to what should be the duration, and when is the proper time for the researcher to exit from the field and it may be ‘as much time as needed, not more, not less.’

According to Reddi and Singh, it is useful for the researcher to leave the field from time to time and discuss the findings and trends with other researchers as their added perspective might be useful in gathering further data. Discussing the trends with them will help you know whether the observations are in the right direction or are getting distracted to other issues and also what more need to be observed. It would be possible to correct the error while field work in progress. Whenever you are in a position to find answers to your research questions and decide to leave, you should exit with tact and diplomacy without causing any unpleasantness among group members.
12.4.5 Analysis and Interpretation

Once the entire sets of data have been collected, the data need to be organised, classified and analysed using appropriate analysis techniques. In observation method, the data analysis is a continuous process which starts with the collection of data itself and continues throughout the study. It is desirable to transfer the notes and interpret the observations at the end of the day while the events and the context in which these took place are still fresh in your mind. Daily analysis helps you to ascertain whether the observations are proceeding in the right direction or not. It helps to sharpen your skills to collect relevant information without getting digressed from research objectives. Daily analysis, however, requires a certain discipline on the part of the researcher.

Like other qualitative methods, the events, activities and interactions observed are analysed using conceptual frameworks. The emergent patterns and themes are uncovered and likely explanations provided. The information thus obtained is described in words, diagrams and pictures in place of numerical, tables and charts. Quotations from the observed group can also be included as part of analysis.

Some scholars argue that the interpretation of data should be undertaken by different members of the research team to facilitate cross checking of findings and eliminating bias and error. It also helps to remove inconsistency and contradictions in the findings. According to Wimmer and Dominick, use of several observers to cross validate results and triangulation to supplement the observational data with multiple data collection methods can diminish the impact of selective perception. However, many a time as a researcher you will have to analyse the entire set of data yourself. In such cases, efforts should be made to minimise personal bias and subjectivity. For that it is imperative on your part to develop a systematic approach and strong analytical skills.

Thick Description

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) used the expression ‘Thick description’ as blending of observation and interpretation which together provide ‘thick description’ of a culture or a group. It is the description of data obtained by thorough and detailed investigation of a single case or narrow set of examples (Bertrand & Hughes, 2013). Within the interpretation process, researchers consider the relevant social context which helps them to understand that their observations are representations of a group’s cultural reality (Brennen, 2013).

Check Your Progress: 3

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1) Among different forms of documentation, which one you choose while undertaking observation and why? Give reasons.
2) Explain the term ‘thick description’.

12.5 ETHICAL ISSUES IN OBSERVATION

By now you would have understood that Observation method involves some ethical issues. While most of these are general in nature and applicable to other methods as well, such as taking prior consent of the participants to willingly participate in the activity, upholding the right to privacy and being honest about the motives of research etc. Some issues are very specific to this method especially to covert observation - when the community members are not aware that they are being observed for research purpose. Many scholars do not support covert observations and emphasise the need for taking the subjects into confidence by explaining the purpose of research and how you plan to use the research findings.

You also need to have a very open mind free from prejudices and pre-conceived notions about a culture or group you plan to study. You should also remain flexible and open to new observational strategies. It helps if you keep your presence rather muted and in background. Many a time people share their personal information during the process of informal interactions which if disclosed could harm them. The researcher should protect the respondents from any physical and emotional harm which my come their way due to disclosure of information as well as identity of those involved.

It is equally important that you do not impose your own worldview on people and refrain from judging how things should be or what they mean. This brings us to the concept of **reflexivity** which has been discussed by some scholars in relation to ethnography and observation method. Reflexivity is critically thinking about “the place from which they observe” (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). “It helps researchers to consider the difficulty of understanding those being observed with different values, rituals and experiences. It reminds them that as outsiders they may have limited access to the lives of those being studied and that there is possibility that there may be alternate interpretations for their observations” (Brennen, 2013).

You should also guard against getting emotionally involved with people and the events as you establish close association with them. While the method itself is said to be subjective it is a good idea to verify the interpretation by talking with people to bring in as much objectivity as possible. Once the project is complete, you may go back to the community members and share your findings with them. This will give them the feeling of being part of the project and impart a sense of ownership.
12.6  LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we discussed Observation method which involves the process of detailed, in-depth description of everyday life and practice. Observation method aims to study the overt behaviour of individuals, group, culture in different social settings by simply observing them. Observations may be structured or unstructured; participant or non participant.

It was explained that it is important for you to understand the relevant social context of what you observe. You need to analyse the sequences and frequencies of activities, rituals, interactions being held in-depth.

For analysis, select relevant examples for further commentary and discuss key observations and provide likely explanations. It is useful to compare with other available documentary evidences to provide a comprehensive picture. It is equally important to step away from the culture to think critically and then document to minimise subjectivity. Once analysis is complete, apply relevant theories to interpret the information collected and create a written account of the interpretations for sharing with others.

It was further explained that in research, different tools and techniques are combined to throw light on a common problem and view the problem from a number of angles and no method is used exclusively or in isolation. Keeping in view the inherent limitations of observation method, ideally, the method should be used in combination with other research methods for greater confidence in the findings. Moreover, each study has a defined scope therefore it can provide only partial answers. Even then the findings from observation method provide useful insights for future studies on similar nature and themes.

12.7  REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING


Reddi U. V., Singh J. (2003), Knowing your Audience, Manual for Educational Media Researchers, CEMCA, New Delhi


12.8  CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

1) Five strengths of Observation method are:
Research Methods – Qualitative

- It provides direct and in-depth experience
- The context in which certain behaviours take place can also be understood.
- The range of information collected is much wider
- It allows observing different people doing different activities at the same time.
- It provides useful insights in the initial stages of needs assessment and development of audience profiles.

2) Five limitations of Observation method are:
- The method is of little help in knowing the past and private behaviour of the respondents.
- The method is less effective in collecting information about personal beliefs, feelings, opinions, motivations and expectations, unless relevant questions are asked.
- Since large number of activities takes place in the study area, the researcher may get too absorbed with one activity and leave out some important activity relevant for the study.
- The researcher can get emotionally involved in the lives of the people being studied leading to subjectivity in findings.
- The findings are relevant for a particular group, section or area in which the study has been undertaken and may not be applicable for other groups/sections/areas.

Check Your Progress 2
1) In my view, non-participant observation is most effective because it will give me the freedom to observe the respondents from very close quarters. However, my observation will be based on what was observed but not experienced.

2) The expression ‘going native’ pertains to the researcher who abandons the research project midway and gets thoroughly integrated with the community s/he had set out to study.

Check Your Progress 3
1) I will choose a specifically designed daily diary for documentation having specific heads and sub-heads outlined in the light of the research objectives. The raw data from the field will be recorded in a systematic way to help in analysis at a later stage.

2) Thick description is a term used by anthropologists for blending of observation and interpretation to provide a holistic view of a culture or a group. It is the description of data obtained by thorough and detailed investigation of a single case or a narrow set of examples.