

# Utility of Observation As A Tool of Data Collection in Empirical Research

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## Abstract

The observation is an important tool to collect the crucial data, wherein questionnaires or interview tool has limitations. The observation tool is mostly useful in three circumstances: the population is reluctant to share the information, the population is unable to share the information, there is a possibility of sharing wrong information under the influence or otherwise. The paper is intended to make the reader acquainted with the pre-requisite of the observation tool of data collection, the type of observation tool of data collection, advantages and limitations of observation as a tool of data collection.

**Keywords**— Research methodology, observation, tool of data collection, types of observation, limitations of observation tool of data collection

## I. INTRODUCTION

"Science begins with observation and must ultimately return to observation for its final validation".<sup>1</sup>

Observation is an action of purposeful, pre-planned,<sup>2</sup> Systematic, scientific and acute watching and noting of the phenomenon under study. It is an instinct of human beings to observe events happening around them. After a keen observation natural process of thinking starts. A person may start thinking, why did it happen? How did it happen? Etc. Keen observation can lead to scientific discovery, and haphazard observation may lead to superstitions or wrong perceptions about the phenomenon. In the ancient period, when human beings were

unable to understand the causes and consequences of happening of events, they used to explain some of the happenings in the name of God or supernatural power. The development of scientific methodology, methods, tools, and techniques played a vital role in developing scientific temper and rational human beings.

Many a time, the observation is conducted in an unsystematic, unscientific, and haphazard way. Observation, nonetheless a useful technique, is one of the most difficult techniques to be adopted in social science research.

The observation tool is mostly useful in three circumstances:

- a) When the population under study is not ready to share the information.
- b) When there is a possibility that the population may share wrong or partial information.
- c) When the population is unable to share the information through other tools of data collection. The population may be unable to share the information through interview or

<sup>1</sup> Good and Hatt, *Methods in Social Research* (1981), McGraw-Hill Book Company, Singapore. P.119.

<sup>2</sup> In uncontrolled observation also, there shall be some kind of planning otherwise, the investigator may collect all sorts of data, and it would be difficult to segregate relevant and irrelevant data at the end of observation.

questionnaire tools of data collection because of a lack of education, the inability to articulate, or the inability to understand the language used by the researcher. A tribal group under study may be unable to provide information through interview or questionnaire data collection tools.

The paper on the observation tool of data collection is intended to provide a basic understanding of the observation tool of data collection.

## II. PRE-REQUISITE OF OBSERVATION TOOL OF DATA COLLECTION:

A pre-planned, scientific, and systematic observation, recording, analysis, and interpretation of the data are pre-conditions of scientific results.

The observer needs:

- 1) *To determine the objectives* of the research or things, happening or events to be happened.
- 2) *To identify the population (people or group) to be observed*-who shall be observed.
- 3) *To plan the observation*-when to observe, how to observe and what is to be observed and when to observe.
- 4) *To determine noting plan*-the researcher shall determine the method of recording the observation. Lack or haphazard plan of noting creates problems in the analysis and interpretation of the data. The data shall be recorded under an appropriate heading and sub-headings. In any event, the record must be relatively complete and almost certainly will not be complete without the use of notes taken during the day and a conscientious attempt to make a full log at the end of the day.<sup>3</sup> It is painful but profitable to collect maximum information relating to the problem under investigation. At the time of collection of data, some of the information which may seem to be partially relevant can be useful at the time of analysis and interpretation of the data.

<sup>3</sup> Good and Hatt, *Methods in Social Research* (1981), McGraw-Hill Book Company, Singapore. P.124.

- 5) *To get acquainted with population/group(s)*- The observer shall study the general attitude, values, and functioning of the group before entering into the group or before starting the observation. It will facilitate establishing the natural relationship with the population/group.
- 6) *To determine the role to be played*-In participant observation, the observer needs to determine a suitable role to be played in the group before entering or immediately after entering into the group. If the role is not suitable to the observer, it is difficult to play the role effectively, and ultimately the observer may not be able to establish natural relations or rapport with the population/group.

## III. TYPES OF OBSERVATION:

There are three basic types of observation viz., Participant, Non-participant and Quasi-Participant Observation. The distinction between these three types depends upon the observer's sharing or not sharing the life of the group under observation.<sup>4</sup> Selection of the type of observation is based on various factors such as the nature of the problem, nature of population, nature and precision of the data required.

### a) Participant Observation:

In a participant observation, the observer participates in the actual functioning of the population/group or the community being observed. He may play any role suitable to him/her or conduct any suitable activity being part of a group under observation. He/she disguises himself as a member of the community. The observer shows that he/she is part and parcel of the group under study. According to John Madge, "When the heart of the observer is made to beat as the heart of any other member of the group under observation, rather than as that of detached emissary from

<sup>4</sup> C.R. Kothari, *Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (2010),

Published by New Age International Publishers, New Delhi. P. 96

some distant laboratory, then he has earned the title of participant-observer."<sup>5</sup> The participant-observer needs to understand and adjust to the cultural, social, and power setup of the group in order to win the confidence of the group under observation. The participant-observer is thus considered a person who can give feedback to society as well as the objective view of said society to policy makers without in any way allowing his/her personal, emotional, or social attachment to the community.<sup>6</sup>

#### **b) Non-Participant Observation:**

In a non-participant observation, the observer does not directly participate in the functioning of the population or group. He/she observes the happening of events from a distant place. Even if he/she is present in the group or near to the group, he keeps himself aloof from the functioning of the group. In a participant observation, since the observer is a part of the community, he can observe minute things such as emotions (Fear, Anger, Sadness, Joy, Disgust, Trust, etc.) and body language. In a non-participant observation, the observer stands at a distant place, so he/she may not be able to observe minute things or close conversation. Although there are a number of hurdles in non-participant observation, it is a very useful method in an exploratory phase of research.

#### **c) Quasi-Participant Observation:**

In this type of observation, the observer may participate in some of the activities of the community, and the rest of the activities he/she may observe from a distant place without actual participation. The observer may participate in the organization of the programmes, games, dance, etc., and may observe religious ceremonies without actively participating as a member of the community in the ceremony. It

is sometimes difficult to disguise oneself completely, particularly when the group is working in a close circle. This method is useful when the observer does not have adequate knowledge of the custom(s) or functioning of the group, or he/she feels uncomfortable while playing a direct role in the main functioning of the group. For example, in observation of the criminal tribe or community, it is difficult to play the same role expected in the group. In quasi-participant observation, it is easy to win the confidence of the group by remaining emotionally and psychologically detached from the group. In quasi-participant observation and participant observation, the researcher is sufficiently near to the group. So he can listen to the conversation of the members of the group.

### **IV. ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS OF OBSERVATION METHOD:**

Following are the prominent advantages and demerits of the observation tool of data collection:

#### **a) Advantages of the Observation:**

- 1) In an observation method, the natural behaviour of the group is observed. In other types of methods of data collection, there is a possibility to modify/manipulate natural behavior/response by the respondents. The respondent may not be willing to share actual situations or data. In this sense, this method is more objective as compared to other types of methods.
- 2) The observation method is useful when the respondents are unable or unwilling to express their views. The respondents may be unable or not willing to express their views on the subject matter because of cultural differences, lack of education, etc., or respondents may not be able to articulate their views in a precise manner.
- 3) In many instances, the observation can lead to further research, or it would be an important insight while formulating the research problem or hypothesis.
- 4) The observation method is useful when other methods cannot be easily and

<sup>5</sup> Wilkinson and Bhandarkar, *Methodology and Techniques of Social Research*, Published by Himalaya Publishing House. P.194

<sup>6</sup> Walter Fernandes, *Participant Observation or Participator Research? A Critical Search for Alternatives, Legal Research and Methodology* (2010), Published by Indian Law Institute, New Delhi. P. 333.

effectively used, viz., in a study of the lunatic person, juveniles, children, or criminal segments, other methods are not very effective.

- 5) The observation method helps to study psychology, fear, hope, and other emotions of the units under observation.
- 6) In an observation method, since natural behavior is observed, the prediction of future behavior is more authentic compared to other methods of data collection.
- 7) Since in an observation method, the entire happening is observed, the observer would be in a position to record, analyze and interpret the behavior in the context of a situation or socio-cultural setup of the society.
- 8) The participant-observer has dual advantages. He/She can observe the natural behavior, and if he/she has any doubt about the inference drawn, he/she has an opportunity to verify it by indirectly discussing it with some of the members of the group.

#### **b) Limitations/De-merits:**

- 1) The observation method of data collection does not provide information related to past events and future plans.
- 2) The observation method of data collection cannot be used when a response is an opinion of the person.
- 3) Certain close relationships or behavior cannot be easily observed, such as domestic violence, family crisis, the behavior of the criminal gang, relation between husband and wife.
- 4) The observer can observe a very limited population, which is not geographically scattered.
- 5) The emotions, feelings, or biases of the observer may be reflected. The observer may be unable to detach himself/herself from the subject matter. In this situation, there is a possibility of biased inferences.
- 6) He/she may interpret the behavior based on his/her own experience rather than understanding the social and cultural setup of the segment under observation.
- 7) In an observation method, it is difficult to verify the results unless the observation is done for a considerably long period.
- 8) In a participant observation, the observer may not be able to play a suitable role accepted in the community under observation. For example, in a study on the *modus operandi* of the criminal segment, the researcher may not be able to participate actively in the daily functioning of the group.
- 9) For social scientists, it is difficult to pass a test of a true member of the group in a participant and quasi-participant observation. Both the member of the group and social scientists may feel uncomfortable while working with each other. In this situation, members of the group may manipulate their natural behavior.
- 10) In a participant observation, the investigator's experience is unique, peculiarly his own, so that a second researcher would not be able to record the same facts, which leads to less standardization of the data.<sup>7</sup>
- 11) Since the investigator does not have any control over the behavior of the group, it is a more expensive, time and resource-consuming method of data collection compared to other methods.
- 12) In a non-participant observation, many a time, the observer stands at a distant place. He/she may not be able to listen to the conversation of the members of the group under investigation. Half or unclear conversation or mere gestures and postures may lead to wrong inferences. In this sense, the data collected is less reliable compared to other tools of data collection.
- 13) There is also a likelihood that casual observers will misread the state of mind or social atmosphere and characterize it in

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<sup>7</sup> See, Good and Hatt, *Methods in Social Research* (1981), McGraw-Hill Book Company, Singapore P. 122.

terms of their own values rather than those who are immediately involved.<sup>8</sup> He/she may judge certain outward appearances of a group in the light of the standards of his own culture.<sup>9</sup>

- 14) Since the participant-observer is part and parcel of the group, a casual observer may overlook certain happenings, considering them as common things/happenings.
- 15) In a non-participant observation, the continuous presence of an outsider in the group/community may make the group feel uncomfortable. He may be looked at with suspicion.

## V. CONCLUSION

In many situations, observation as a tool of data collection has its own limitations as compared to interview and questionnaire. However, there are multitude situations mentioned above in which the observation works as an effective tool for data collection. The researcher shall apply the observation tool with pre-requisites and advantages and limitations. A thorough understanding of this tool along with methods and techniques of data collection and analysis would yield effective result.

## REFERENCES

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<sup>8</sup> Pouline V. Young, *Scientific Social Survey and Research*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (1986), Published by Prentice-Hall of India, New Delhi. P. 165.

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