Observation

Global Health & Social Science Website
Learning Objectives

• At the end of the session students will be able to:
  
  • Discuss the main concepts and principles that relate to observation
  
  • Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of observation as qualitative research methods
Definition of observation

• Systematic watching and recording of what people do and say … in naturally occurring settings and careful recording of what occurs (Mays & Pope, 1995)
Observation

• **Purpose**

  • To explore culture and social organisation

• **Advantages**

  • Can be used for enquiry into sensitive issues not open direct questioning

  • Allows the researcher to see for her/himself

  • Bridges the gap between what people say and do

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Observation in practice

• When is it used?
  • Clinical / nursing practice
  • Teaching / Training
  • Meetings
  • Any work places

• Why is it used?
  • Skills
  • Performance
  • Attitudes and social relationships / interactions
  • Language

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Types of observation

- Direct observation
- Participant observation

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Participant Observation

• The researcher as part of the research!
• The participant observer to the observing participant continuum
• Participating but only observes or fully participating but making observations?
• Clear research aim and objectives are essential!
• Preparation; Reading; Thinking; Discussing
Tips Research Diary

• A valid and important ‘data set’ and tool for analysis
• Hard backed numbered and dated notebooks
• Never leave the house without pen and diary
• Get into habit of writing everything down
• Date, time and page number
• Devise coding method for different data – observations, thoughts, analysis – codes & categories
• Type up into a word document
• Add in new ideas & thoughts
• Keep both hard and electronic copies safe
Challenges to undertaking participant observation

• Small scale - challenging to capture a wide number of experiences

• Can be very time consuming

• Ethical challenges and ensuring informed consent of those participating

• Can have accusations of bias and subjectivity - important for the researcher to reflect on what they are “seeing”
Case Study: MAFESSTA
Study Malawi

- Epi-social science research project
- Based on the shores of Lake Malawi
- Objective understanding the factors that shaped vulnerability and resilience to HIV
Key methods used

• Worked in 12 villages with in-depth fieldwork carried out in 2 of these villages (my PhD)

• PhD objectives included investigating gender power relations and how they shaped vulnerability to HIV

• We used qualitative and participatory research methodology
Observation

• We used observation; structured tasks & times pre-selected and included:

• Afternoons with women weaving mats and drying fish; wet season – seeing challenges and changes of season

• Early in the morning boats landed the catches – we bought fish; see the fierce competition for fish at certain times of year

• In the bars following high fish catches and low fish catches; - violence and alcohol abuse
Challenges/dilemmas

• Bars unsafe places esp for women at night; the male research assistant often went alone; female research assistant felt she could not go to the bar because fears of rumours that she was a sex worker

• Insights into participants behaviour; difficult for the RAs to discuss this/introduce contradictions

• Ethics - participants were not always aware that the male research assistant was doing structured observation
References


