

Online Classroom™

SOCIOLOGY SHORT CUTS 1

DOING SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Activities And Web Links



Observation

4. Observation

Activity 1: Observing the Observer

Prior to the class prepare a list of what you think are the most significant ideas raised in the Observational Research video (these can be used to fill in anything missed by students during the exercise). You might also want to prepare a list of advantages / disadvantages associated with participant observational research. Before you show the video segment, split the class into two groups (more if it's a large class, but try to keep the groups fairly small if possible).

Group 1: These are designated as *covert observers* (they don't need to know this at this stage) and they should be told they are *not allowed* to take notes while watching the video. They are to watch, listen and remember any important ideas.

Group 2: These are designated as *overt observers* (again, they don't need to know this) and they are told they *should* take notes while watching the video.

Show the video without interruption and when it has finished, tell the groups they have 10 minutes (or whatever suits the length of the class) to assemble a set of notes that covers the key ideas raised in the video. Each group should produce a master copy of their observations. Start the groups on their task and then go to the overt group and quietly tell them they can ask you one question (or more if you judge it necessary) about anything they've seen in the video. After 6 or 7 minutes return to the overt group and quietly answer any question/s they may have (if possible the covert group should not hear your answer).

Each group (covert and overt) should then give their report to the class, identifying the key aspects of participant observation they have identified.

Ask the class the questions you have prepared. Some questions should refer to what is said (e.g. what types of surveillance did the school use?), some to what is seen (e.g. games being played by students) and there should be a couple from what you have told the overt group (the covert group will probably object here).

This activity can be used to illustrate a number of points.

1. Some of the difficulties of being a covert observer. Develop this by compiling a list of the advantages of overt compared to covert observation. Particularly important here - as illustrated by the Activity - is the ability to ask questions. Balance this list with some of the disadvantages of overt observation.
2. All observation is theory dependent. Different researchers (or groups) will see the 'same' thing differently.
3. In observational research researchers don't usually have a clear-cut theory or hypothesis they are trying to test. Explanation or theory often arises from observation.

Activity 2: Observation Grid

This exercise can be completed in one of two ways:

a. Whole class: Print the [Observation Grid pdf](#) file and photocopy onto an OHP acetate. Display the grid on a whiteboard and ask the class to suggest examples of different types of observational research (for example, overt participant observation in a school).

b. Small group: Photocopy the [Observation Grid pdf](#) file and distribute to the class. Each group can be asked to generate examples for each segment of the grid (for example, one group looks at overt non-participant observation, another looks at covert participant observation etc.). Alternatively, all of the groups can be asked to identify possible examples for the complete grid. Combine the suggestions on a whiteboard for the whole class.

This exercise can be repeated later in the course, once the students have studied sociological examples of observational research, by asking them to identify sociological studies for each segment of the grid.

Alternatively, photocopy or draw the grid onto a large sheet of paper and attach to the classroom wall. Encourage students to identify examples for each section of the grid as-and-when they come across them during the course.

Required material:

[Observation Grid.pdf](#)

Activity 3: Strangers

A key part of thinking sociologically, or developing a sociological imagination, is to try to see the “taken for granted” world around you afresh by looking at it as if you were a stranger. This is particularly important in observational research.

Divide students into small groups.

Ask them to imagine they are from a totally different culture. They are doing a non-participant observation study of your school or college as part of a study on British education.

They should observe, take notes and, if possible, use digital cameras and / or video. They should be asked to question consistently what they would usually have taken for granted as part of school life; for example, the ages and appearance of students, meal times, use of mobiles, lessons, what is posted on notice boards, socialising outside class, interaction with teachers and so on.

Each group should then write up their observations and compare their findings.

Not only does this activity give students some insight into one of the key techniques used by sociologists in observational research, it can also illustrate some of the familiar problems e.g. places that they weren't able to observe (access), people possibly changing their behaviour (observer effect) different groups “reading” the same thing differently (investigator effect).

Reports can also be evaluated in terms of the key criteria of reliability, validity and representativeness:

Can the same observations be repeated?

Do the researchers believe they were seeing things as they really were or might there have been things distorting their observations?

To what extent do students feel their findings could be generalised?

Supplementary Material:

[Observation.ppt](#)

4. Observation

http://www.ucel.ac.uk/rlos/p_np_observation/

A short presentation that uses mixture of text and Shockwave Flash graphics / narration (you will need Flash player installed) to illustrate some key points about participant and non-participant observation. Short activity and assessment questions are also included.

www.s-cool.co.uk

Revision notes (with some illustrations) explaining participant observation (includes evaluation and examples).

http://www.connectpublications.co.uk/sociology_central_issues_samples.htm

Sample chapter (in pdf format) from Connect Publications that outlines various aspects of participant observation. Includes a range of student activities.

