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4. Observation

Ethnography

A research design aimed at understanding behaviour in its natural contexts.

Research Methods immerse researcher in the world of subjects.

Examples :

- **Observation**
- **Unstructured Interviews**
- **Personal Documents**

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Observational Methods:

Non-participant: researcher observes from a distance and is not directly involved with those being observed.

Participant: researcher interacts with those being observed.



Covert: subjects do not know they are being observed.

Overt: Subjects are aware they are being observed.

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Ethics in Observational Research

Research ethics: a duty of care the researcher owes to the participants.

Key ethical principles - Participants should:

- Be fully informed of the purpose of the research.
- Not be harmed.
- Not be specifically identified.

An ethical dilemma: a conflict between ethical principles and the aim of the research.

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Participant Observation**Advantages:**

- **High validity:** see behaviour in its natural context.
- **Empathy:** can understand individual meanings.
- Can study **social interaction** including non-verbal interaction.
- Gives **flexibility** and **innovation**.

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Participant Observation: Problems

- **Getting In:** May be difficult for the researcher to enter an organisation or group (such as a school).
- **Staying In:** Researcher has to work at making relationships and maintaining trust.
- **Getting Out:** Not easy to simply "stop participating".

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Participant Observation: Limitations

- **Low reliability** – difficult to repeat.
- **Observer effect** – people's behaviour may change if they know they are being observed.
- **Hard to generalise:** small samples and people studied rarely representative of wider population.
- **Non-standardised** data collection: usually hard to quantify.
- **Time consuming, labour intensive.**

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