**Observational Research**

**There are generally two types of Observation:**

* **Nonparticipant observation**. The researcher is not part of the activity taking place, but simply observes without interaction with the subjects. There is no emotional involvement on the part of the researcher. The observer is basically an eavesdropper.
* **Participant observation**. The researcher takes part in the community, organization, or activity. The researcher as attempting to learn what it is like to be part of the community, organization, by participating in the activity, interacting with the subjects.

In both types of observation, the researcher attempts to learn about context in which behavior takes place.

* **Context may include:**
  + Physical surroundings.
  + Other people in the setting.
  + The interactions among different people in the setting.
  + The social, cultural, political, or economic context in which the behavior occurs and why it occurs.
* **What is the purpose of observations?**
  + To provide a deeper, richer understanding of interview data or survey data.
  + To identify patterns that may occur in the behavior of people, social interactions, or the setting.
  + To see patterns people are unwilling to talk about.
  + To provide direct personal experience and knowledge.
  + To add to or “move beyond” the perception of both the researcher and participants.
* **Observation alone is rarely enough. Researchers may additionally want to:**
  + Interview participants.
  + Interview key informants or people “in the know” about the setting, surroundings, or context.
  + A key Informant may help the researcher learn about and gain access to a “community.”
* **What might you note in an observation?**
  + Formal and informal patterns of interaction among people
  + Ways people organize themselves
  + Informal or formal rules in operation
  + Recurring events
  + “Down time” when things don’t happen
  + Sequence of events
  + Differences in what happens at various times
  + Ritual and Ceremonies
  + Crises
  + Unplanned activities.
  + Unexpected activities

**Recording observations**

* **Record what one observes during observation.** Most successful observers have developed strong powers of concentration and memory and are able to be unobtrusive. Different researchers may rely on one or more of the following tools, or may develop their own methods of recording observations. Develop a system.
  + Note book
  + Tables
  + Checklists
  + Diagrams and maps
* **You might want to Include in your notes**
  + Where you observed
  + When you observed
  + Who was there or not there
  + What happened
* **Expand on notes after the observation. Complete your sentences – add description**.
  + Use descriptive adjectives
  + Use action verbs
  + Avoid making judgments about what you see. Be objective not subjective.
  + Be as specific as you can!
* **Write a narrative** [several paragraphs] that describes what you saw in detail. Narratives are also called “thick description” and in most qualitative research studies also include information on researcher reactions and interpretation.

**Issues**

* **Participation**A researcher’s participation may change the nature of the activity being observed. There is no way of measuring how the presence of the observer influences the behavior of group members.
* **Concealment**Studies involving covert observations may have a difficult time passing ethics or IRB reviews, but it is not impossible.   
  Most non–intrusive observations in public places do not involve purposeful concealment but if a subject realizes she/he is being observed, they may want to know what the researcher/observer is doing. The observer should have an information sheet about her/his study readily available. Subjects may ask that the observer not include them in recorded observations. Ethically, the researcher/observer should not include any subject who asks not to be included even if there is no individually identifiable information being recorded.
* **Identifying the scope of the observation**

Observation is selective. A researcher does not observe anything and everything, but selects the range of things to be observed on the basis of the nature, scope and objectives of her/his study.

**Information Sheet for Observational Research**

Though observations may not require a formal consent process, the researcher should usually have information about the study readily available to any subject who may ask about what the researcher is doing. The information sheet may include much of the same information a consent form would have, but not require any signature. Here are some points you might want to include in an information sheet:

**Who are you?**

**What is the purpose of your observation?**

**What kind of information you are collecting?** You will not collect/record any individually identifiable information**.  
What will you do with the information?**

**Do they have a choice about being noted in your observations?** Subjects can ask that their actions not to be included in your observation notes.

**Who can they can ask** if they have any questions or concerns about your research? You should provide them with your contact information, your faculty adviser’s contact information (if applicable), and the Kenyon IRB contact information.  (do not give personal addresses)

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