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Observation

Observation is a very effective way of finding out what people do in particular contexts, the routines and interactional patterns of their everyday lives. In the human services, observational research methods can provide an understanding of what is happening in the encounter between a service provider and user, or within a family, a committee, a ward or residential unit, a large organisation or a community.

Observation has a long history in ethnographic fieldwork in anthropology (Spradley, 1980) and sociology (Johnson, 1975; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). The many classic studies using ethnographic methods include Liebow's studies of African American street corner men (1967) and homeless women (1993), Dalton's (1959) study of formal and informal aspects of the world of managers, and Becker et al.'s (1961) study of the professional enculturation of medical students.

This chapter commences with a brief introduction to some of the practicalities of observation in human services research. We consider some of the strengths and limitations of observation, approaches to combining observation with other data collection methods, observation roles, the timing and duration of observation sessions, and recording observations. The second part of the chapter includes two edited interviews with researchers who used observation as part of their research.

Choosing observation

Like all data collection methods, observation has its strengths and limitations. In reality, every method involves trade-offs between relative strengths and relative limitations. Fortunately, we are rarely confined to just one way of collecting data. Unlike interviews and document analysis, observation affords access to events as they happen. Observation also generally requires little active effort on the part of those being observed. Unlike interviews, which can be time consuming for participants, taking not only the time for the interview but also effort in making arrangements to clear other activities, observation takes place at the same time as an activity that would be happening anyway.

The observer is, however, limited to observable social phenomena. Internal processes of cognition and emotion cannot be observed, even if non-verbal indicators of what these may be are evident. Observation alone cannot tell us why people do the things they do or what the particular activity means to them—even astute observation of non-verbal behaviour cannot provide access to a person's own understanding of why they are smiling, frowning or crying. And while observation can assist in understanding events as they unfold, events that have already occurred or that have not yet happened cannot be observed.

It is sometimes assumed that observation is more 'objective' than interviewing, because the setting is not so controlled by the researcher. Unlike the interviewer, who is intricately involved in the interaction, the observer watches what happens between others. The presence of the observer will, however, inevitably impact on the setting to varying degrees. People who know they are being watched may alter their behaviour in all sorts of ways, both consciously and unconsciously.

The observer also controls what is recorded and thus brought to analysis. Just as the information obtained from in-depth interviews reflects the interviewing style and skill of the interviewer, material obtained through observation is filtered through the observer. The observer has first to see something and then to identify it as interesting and worth reporting. Different observers undoubtedly notice different things. The research purpose, the researcher's conceptual framework and whatever other biases and assumptions they bring to the research will all influence what is noticed and what sense is made of it. These are the realities of research practice. There is

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always the risk of imposing one's own interpretations and assumptions on what is observed and so failing to understand what an activity means for those involved in it.

It is important to build in safeguards to minimise such misinterpretation. Understanding of the context being observed is one approach. This can be achieved either through prior familiarity with the setting or through a period of general observation at the commencement of a study. Where practicable, the use of co-observers may provide a check on observation. Are all observers seeing similar things and making similar sense of them? Where it is possible that co-observers are operating with similar biases, and that agreement reflects their shared understandings rather than what is happening in the observation setting, it may be helpful to include a naive observer, someone whose mindset is outside that of the researcher. Ultimately, there may be no better approach than checking out with the research participants themselves what their activity means to them, either in formal interviews as a further stage of data collection, or taking successive stages of analysis back to them for verification.

Combining observation with interviews

Observation can be used at different stages of a study and for different reasons. Used in the early stages of a study, it can be a useful way of understanding the context of the phenomenon under investigation and working out what the important questions to be asked are. This is particularly valuable where the researcher is unfamiliar with the phenomenon. This type of observation could precede a more structured phase of observation or other data collection methods. Later in this chapter, Anne Coleman talks about how she used observation as a basis for getting to know the research context and helping to work out what issues to explore in interviews. An equally strong argument could be made for conducting interviews first, in order to work out what are the important things, from the perspective of the study group, to look for in the observations. Cheryl Tilse's study is an example of this approach.

Observation can be particularly useful where research participants have limited verbal skills. Combining interviews and observation is a common approach in research with children and with people with learning disabilities, for example, see Chapter 5.

The observation process

We now consider some of the practicalities of observation, including observation roles, the timing and duration of observation sessions, and recording.

Observation roles

Observation roles can be viewed along a continuum from complete observer through observer-as-participant to participant-as-observer to complete participant (Gold, 1958; Adler & Adler, 1987). In a similar way, Spradley (1980) identifies five levels of participation: non-participation, passive participation, moderate participation, active participation and complete participation. Traditionally, ethnographers have accepted that most levels other than that of complete observer or non-participant will involve a degree of deception. Using deception is, however, quite problematic, both ethically and for its potential impact on the researcher. (Ethical issues in relation to the importance of obtaining informed consent to participate in research were discussed in Chapter 2.) In a personal account of the experience of participant observation, Gans says:

> A final source of anxiety is the deception inherent in participant observation . . . even though [the fieldworker] seems to give of himself when he participates, he is not really doing so and, thus, deceives the people he studies. He pretends to participate emotionally when he does not; he observes even when he does not appear to be doing so, and like the formal interviewer, he asks questions with covert purposes of which his respondents are likely to be unaware. In short, psychologically, the participant observer is acting dishonestly; he is deceiving people about his feelings, and in observing when they do not know it, he *is* spying on them . . . This has two personal consequences: a pervasive feeling of guilt and, partly in compensation, a tendency to overidentify with the people being studied (Gans, 1982, p. 59).

In this chapter we are assuming fully negotiated observer roles that do not involve deception, whatever the level of participation. By this we mean being absolutely clear about one's role as a researcher and, wherever possible, ensuring that the people actually being observed (and not just official gatekeepers) are aware of the observer's presence. Even where observation is conducted from a covert place,

such as behind a one-way mirror, we assume that the observer's presence has been negotiated and that those being observed are aware they are being watched.

The observer is always in some respects a participant, as their presence will always have some impact on the setting. The level of participation that is possible or appropriate will vary from one setting to another. In many general settings, the goal of 'just blending in' is more likely to be achieved through a level of everyday participation. Non-participation to the extent of avoiding basic human interactions, such as responding to greetings, would in all likelihood draw more attention to the observer's presence and potentially heighten their impact on the setting. On the other hand, participation is unlikely to be appropriate when observing highly specialised activity, such as in an operating theatre or in a child protection or psychiatric case conference. Even where the observer is qualified to participate in such an activity, they are unlikely to be able to do justice to both roles at once.

While the boundaries of the researcher's role should be negotiated and firmly established prior to commencing the observation, in reality some flexibility may develop in the role as the research progresses. The role of uninvolved observer may be more readily sustained early on in the research when the researcher is relatively unknown in the observation setting. As those being observed become more familiar with the researcher's presence, there may be invitations, even demands, to participate. In this situation we would consider the degree of role clarity established, including clarity as to whether one is primarily participant or observer at any given time, to be the primary issue, rather than the level of participation per se.

While in practice there will often be a continuum of involvement along these dimensions, being clear about where one is (or wants to be) at any point in time is invaluable in two ways. It helps the researcher monitor how things are going, and to gauge whether boundaries need to be adjusted. It can also be helpful for those who are being observed. If the researcher is clear about their purpose and role, and is consistent in this, it will be easier for participants to accept the observer in that role and let them get about the business of observing. In a paradoxical way, participants who understand why the observer is there and what they are doing may be less bothered by their presence and the observer, in turn, may be less likely to have a negative reactive impact on the setting.

When to observe and for how long?

No social setting is static. There will always be a range of activities over time, whether during a day, a week or a month, and within each activity there are likely to be peaks and slow downs of occurrence. Realistically, one cannot hope to observe every single occurrence of an activity. A sampling process thus needs to occur. The best guide to deciding when to observe will be the research purpose. It is important to be clear about what is being observed and to take a cross-section of occurrences. It makes sense to expend valuable observation time at the times when what is being observed is most likely to happen. For example, observations of parents picking up and dropping off children to and from school would need to occur at those two times of the day. Patterns may vary on different days of the week, however (there may be daily changes in patterns of children's activities, or in parents' availability to pick their children up), or throughout the year (Do parents pick up children more commonly at the start of a new term, or during inclement weather?). Whatever the research question, it is important that the observation plan be broad enough to include any significant variations in activity that may potentially alter the conclusions drawn from the research.

The duration of any period of observation needs to be carefully considered. Observation sessions certainly have to be long enough to observe the social processes that are the subject of the study—in a study of changes in client–worker interactions at various stages of counselling sessions, for example, there would be little point in leaving before a session ended. On the other hand, observation requires considerable concentration and sessions should not be so long that alertness fades, or so much has been observed that the observer forgets or lacks the energy to record or reflect on what has happened.

Recording observations

As with so many other aspects of research practice, what and how much to record depends on the purpose of the observation and how the data are to be analysed.

For quantitative analysis, highly structured recording frames may be used (Trickett, 1993; Singh et al., 1997) that enable data to be reduced as they are recorded. This can be useful for the minute

analysis of interactional processes such as the non-verbal communication between a mother and her infant. Recording for qualitative analysis is less structured but decisions still need to be made about how to focus the observation—this could be at a very specific or more general level. In the stories reported below, Cheryl Tilse focused her recording specifically on the movements and interactions of visitors to the nursing homes, while Anne Coleman was interested in a much broader sweep of activity in Fortitude Valley. In each case their purpose flowed from the research question, but the intensity of observation and recording had implications for how long each session lasted. In general, Cheryl was able to observe for longer periods of time than Anne, who, after a couple of hours, became 'overloaded' with things she wanted to record.

Lofland and Lofland (1995) stress the necessity of recording as soon as possible after observing and suggest a practical process for dealing with the often impractical task of writing copious notes while in the field, whether through the risk of missing something else that is important or through concern for how those being observed will respond to one's writing. Their suggestion is to jot down brief notes during the observation and to write these up as full field notes after leaving the field, but always no later than the following morning. These notes should be as faithful a recollection of what happened as possible, and clearly distinguish between exact quotations, paraphrasing and more general recall. These raw field notes should be identified separately from the researcher's own reflections and conceptual material, which themselves may range from brief impressions to more formal analytic notes.

Stories from the field

In each of the following inside stories, observation was used in conjunction with several other methods of data collection, although the interview excerpts included here focus specifically on the use of observation. We asked both Anne Coleman and Cheryl Tilse to begin by talking about why they chose observation as a major method of data collection, then to move on to the practicalities of how they went about it. These two very different examples provide some useful insights into the versatility of observation as a method of data collection and some of the issues to consider when thinking about using observation.

Anne Coleman—Five star motels

Anne's was a multi-method, five-phase study, each phase building on the one before. The phases were observation, followed by informal interviews with a range of people in public spaces, then in-depth interviews with homeless people, a search of documents that related to the local urban renewal process and, finally, a second phase of observation. Anne has published on ethical issues encountered during observation (McAuliffe & Coleman, 1999) and social policy implications of the study (Coleman, 1997). She is talking here about her use of observation as a data collection method.

Choosing observation

Yvonne: Why did you choose observation as an approach to data collection?

Anne: Simply because I'd known people in this group long enough to know that in fact they could be quite devilish . . . They could, just for the fun of it, tell you the biggest story and then tell you something else the next day and then you were caught in that terrible dilemma about, well, what am I going to believe? It's also a very divided community so if you talk to one person they will tell you this is a fact and there's no question about that and if you talk to somebody else they'll tell you something else is a fact. And you find out that none of those things are actually facts . . . So I knew that observation was going to be a really useful way to check what was said to me against what I'd actually seen myself . . .

The other really important reason for doing the observation first up was that because of [my] familiarity [with the area] I had a fair degree of knowledge but I knew that some of that knowledge would be outdated . . . I wanted to go back and just have a look at the whole place and the range of things that happened in those spaces before I actually started to focus myself in again . . .

Yvonne: What were the benefits of that first stage of observation?

Anne: Well, the first one was that I got re-orientated and that was because, actually, in my field journal you can see that there was a level of tension and expectation about me going back in there, and that was about my being in a very different role . . . I was aware that even though I'd talked to people about the fact that I was coming back as a researcher, for most people, as soon as they saw me, I was Anne the social worker not Anne the researcher. So it gave me a chance to re-orientate myself and other people to that new role. It also gave me a chance to see clearly what I suspected, that there were some spaces in the Valley that already were shared public spaces, where in fact homeless people and mainstream community people did have a reasonable level of interaction, but that those spaces had changed in the four years that I hadn't been working in the Valley. It gave all sorts of people a chance to get used to me and that was really important . . . One of the things that happened all the time was that constantly people would come up to me and say, 'What are you doing? What's in the book? What are you writing down there?' A lot of them were homeless people I knew but a great number of them were just local people who felt that this was their space too and they wanted to know who I was, writing in this book, and what I was writing about . . .

Informal interviews in public spaces

Anne: Phase two was like the active engagement—I was in those public spaces I'd identified in the first phase and my purpose was to talk to anybody that used those spaces. 'What do you think about this place? What do you like about the Valley? Why do you come here? Is it interesting? Does it make you feel scared?' Anything that people wanted to tell me about the Valley, I wanted to hear . . . So in between encounters I'd be sitting down taking some notes and if I was just sitting around looking for some interesting people to have a talk to I'd be taking a note of what I was seeing. So it

wasn't strictly observational though observation happened.

Yvonne: So how did that phase differ in terms of its purpose from the first phase?

Anne: The major difference was its focus . . . In the first phase, what was motivating me and the focus of my attention was the space itself. In the second phase, the focus was people . . .

Yvonne: And what were the benefits of that second stage?

Anne: I became much more confident. Probably because all of that initial stuff about being the observer had largely been resolved so I wasn't getting interrupted. People didn't come up and ask me what I was doing any more . . . It was also just another look at things before I started in-depth interviews with homeless people and the more I saw before I went into those interviews obviously the better the interviews were going to be.

Anne went back for a second stage of observation towards the end of the study, even though she had not initially planned to do so.

Anne: After I did the in-depth interviews I thought I was finished until I went back and did the feedback, but there'd been some very interesting and quite significant things that had happened in the Valley while I was doing the in-depth interviews and I wanted to go back and capture what these were about.

Knowing when to stop

Yvonne: When did you start to feel that you had enough data?

Anne: Even before I got to the end of the in-depth interviews, there was a real commonality that was starting to surface . . . was starting to hear the same sorts of things from, you know, police [who] were saying things about people who have been here in the community—they identified 'homeless people' as being local community as opposed to 'itinerants' who are outside people—but I started to hear the same sorts

of things from homeless people about how they perceived themselves. So even though I was getting it from a different point of view, the same sort of stuff was being replicated across different groups and across different homeless people. So it was all starting to converge. Also, I knew that there was still a feedback phase to come and if I'd missed anything major people would say at that stage, 'Hey wait a minute', so there was nothing lost that couldn't be got back. So I felt quite satisfied and somewhat relieved.

Timing, duration and recording

Anne: I couldn't do any more than about two hours at a time because I couldn't absorb it and I couldn't hold it in my memory if I went much over that. So I'd jot down what were basically memory prompts while I was in the field for that two hours. I'd then leave and if I was going straight home, I'd sit down at the computer and start to write up a set of notes based on the ones I'd taken in the field. If there was going to be a delay then I'd go somewhere private and fill the initial notes out, and then write them up as soon as I got home.

Yvonne: So for two hours observing, generally speaking, how long would that take you to write up your notes?

Anne: Anywhere from—if it had been a quiet day, there hadn't been a lot of people round, there hadn't been much happening—maybe two hours. But some days, writing up the field notes would take four hours. Sometimes, if there was more complicated stuff going on, or if anything I'd observed had had a big impact, there'd be another couple of hours of journal time because I also kept a separate journal to record my feelings and also to process, I guess, methodological decisions that I made as I went along. But part of the reason in the end that I kept observation periods to two hours was because I couldn't keep up with writing them up.

Yvonne: Did you vary the time of day that you observed?

Anne: Another useful thing I picked up in the first observational phase was that public spaces in Fortitude Valley change and they can literally change in the movement of a hand. If you were looking in the opposite direction you'd completely miss it. So at one minute a space can be where this particular group is and this is happening. Five minutes later—totally different groups of people, totally different things happening. So I was clear from pretty early on that I had to consider the 24-hour clock and that I had to be aware of what went on all through that clock. So that's what I did. I think in the end the night stuff was under-represented. There was a total of somewhere between 120 and 150 hours and probably only about a third of those hours were night-time hours. So it was definitely weighted on the day-time side but I still spent enough time at night observing to have a clear idea about what went on and I could identify when the transition times across the 24 hours were, when those changes happened, what groups came in and out. So, I think that was a solid enough picture to work from.

Keeping homeless people informed about the study

Anne used an innovative approach to keeping in contact with this population, to let people know she wanted to conduct some in-depth interviews, to advertise her feedback sessions and, generally, to let anyone who was interested know that she was still around and involved in the research. Here, she talks about how she let people know that she wanted to do some interviews.

Anne: I put a flier out saying that I wanted to do interviews with people and why . . . I kept the words to a minimum and I put a graphic on it that after a while every time somebody saw something with that graphic on, they'd go, 'Oh this is a thing about Anne's research.' So even people who couldn't read knew that this was a bona fide communication about this particular piece of research. The graphic was just one of those standard ones you get in computer packages,

but it was a suitcase being opened up and out of the suitcase were springing all these high-rise buildings. So, it kind of captured my sense of what was happening for these people. This is your local area, this is your home, you open it up and now look what's springing up out of it. So, the graphic became a sort of signal all the way through. If there was any communication I wanted to make with people, that went on the top of it. And people who weren't literate then would say to people, 'Here's one of Anne's fliers, like what's happening, what's going on?', so people who couldn't read were able to be involved as well.

Cheryl Tilse—The long goodbye

Cheryl's study of the experiences of older people who had placed a partner in a nursing home used several methods. She first conducted in-depth interviews with nine men and nine women who had recently placed a partner in a nursing home or a dementia hostel. She began with in-depth interviews as her concern was very much with trying to understand the perspectives of the spouses. She then used the six units in which they had placed their partners as a focus for observation of how visitors were treated and provided for. She also conducted brief, semi-structured interviews with staff about how they viewed visitors, and did a content analysis of any documents that the nursing home had produced for or about families.

Here Cheryl talks about her use of observation as a data collection method. She has published two papers on her use of participant observation in this study (Tilse, 1997a; 1997b) and has also reported on the themes from her in-depth interviews with spouses (Tilse, 1994).

Choosing observation

Yvonne: How did you come to choose observation as one of your data collection methods?

Cheryl: It was partly a commitment to try to understand the complexity of the experience and my view that you

couldn't understand how family visitors were provided for and treated without actually being in the setting . . . I also had a theoretical interest in the use of space to include and exclude people in health settings . . . I also wanted to watch interactions between staff and families, and between families and other families. I wanted to understand whether visiting was primarily individual and private or whether it was social and collective. You could only understand [that] by watching what visitors did and how they interacted and how staff interacted with them. So I guess it was based on an understanding that what people say they do is often different to what happens . . . In residential care policy at that time there was a big interest in families. And part of the outcome standards was about being open to visitors and welcoming visitors and home-like environments. So there was a whole lot of rhetoric about families and I guess that was the other reason I wanted to observe because I didn't want to pick up the rhetoric. If I just interviewed staff, I thought there was the risk of [obtaining] socially desirable responses.

Observation role

Yvonne: If you can imagine a continuum between the complete observer and the complete participant, where were you along that line? And did that change at all during the course of the observations?

Cheryl: I was always clear that I was an observer, not a participant, in the sense that I didn't have a relative in the unit. I was saying, 'I'm not a staff member of the unit and I'm not a resident of the unit so I really am an observer and what I've come here to do is observe one feature of life—the treatment of family visitors'. So I really wasn't part of the place or pretending to be part of the place. I set myself up as a researcher, carried a notebook and made notes very overtly. I wanted to be seen as a researcher, as ethically I felt I had to be. And I also felt it provided lots of opportunity for people to

say, 'What are you doing?', and I'd tell them and say, 'Well, what's it like to be a visitor?' So I had a way in to talk to people that I wouldn't have been comfortable with if I was pretending to be a staff member. So at that level I was very clearly an observer—ethically and researchwise . . . For most of it I sat and observed and listened and watched. I was keen to observe from a distance as I wasn't actually interested in what people said to each other—more [in] how the space was used and how people got included or excluded. So I kept myself at quite a distance from most interactions. I guess occasionally I felt I was a participant in that I was there and somebody with dementia would come up and start talking to me and I would have to respond, especially if the staff were running a particular activity. I would then try and help the resident join in the activity. So you would find yourself engaged in that sort of thing. With visitors as well. Some of the visitors would come over and say, 'What are you doing? This is really interesting. Come and have a talk to us.' And I would engage through talking and being part of their visiting and meeting their family. So you did get engaged in that way but it was always very clear to me and I tried to make it very clear to staff that I was just observing visitors. I wasn't doing anything else. But I also had to say I was a participant in that I'm visiting and experiencing all of this—I can't find a place to sit and I've been here all day and the tea trolley just passed me by . . . So I was a participant at that level. So it's always more messy in practice than it is in theory.

Yvonne: You said that you were very overt about your observing—you had your notebook and you were in a sense on view—but also that you tended to sit away from direct interactions. Did people always know they were being watched?

Cheryl: Probably not. I asked staff to tell any visitors that I was on the unit and what I was there for and I left material. But people came in and were talking to staff members about an issue and then they were gone and I'm sure that they weren't aware that I was there. It was

interesting because I spent the whole—as much as I could—almost the whole shift there. I was there for a long time and I did become part of the furniture and I noticed staff would suddenly say to me, 'Oh you're still here?' . . . so I think they did lose track of the fact that I was there, particularly in some of the units where they were busy with bathing and showering and I was just sitting in the dayroom and there were other visitors in the dayroom; and the fact that I'm a woman, and it was quite a feminine environment in terms of residents, visitors and staff. I did come to slip into the furniture or the shrubbery at times.

Timing of the observations

Yvonne: I'm interested in the timing and duration of your observations. You've said you observed on all three shifts?

Cheryl: What I did was try to sample the shifts when visitors were most likely to come. So I'd stay three or four hours. I think they were six-hour shifts . . . So I didn't go at six in the morning when they were showering and feeding people when they told me that no visitors came. I came in the afternoons, sort of mid- to late afternoon, and they used to say no visitors come after seven and that was true. The time I slept over in the nursing home there were no visitors. So it wasn't the whole shift but it was what they told me was the most likely time there'd be visitors on the unit because I made it very clear to them I wasn't observing care. I think that was important in terms of their trust, that I was really interested in observing visitors and the unit in relation to visitors . . .

Yvonne: In hindsight what would you say would be an optimum period of observation?

Cheryl: It depends on what you're observing and the depth of what you're trying to understand so it's really hard to say. I think after more than three hours you must start to lose material. I had a whole lot of things that I was looking at so I'd draw the setting and then when visitors came I'd often draw, this is visitor one, and I'd

watch where they went. They ended up there and then how long they stayed and who talked to them.... Often I had different diagrams for different visitors because it got very complicated but it was that sort of level of observation that kept me engaged. I wasn't trying to look at how residents were being treated. It was quite focused on one particular thing.

Yvonne: There must have been so much going on. Were there times when you saw things that were interesting but had to say to yourself, 'Well, that's really interesting but it's not what I'm here to look at'? Were you able to focus yourself in that way?

Cheryl: Yes. It wasn't that intense, I guess, in most places. So occasionally a whole lot of visitors came at once ... but it was the fact that I was only trying to observe simple things, like did they speak to the registered nurse. I had a whole list of things I was interested in. One was the use of space. One was entry and exits. How did they enter, who did they talk to . . . But most of the time it wasn't high intensity. It was over a fair spread of time. The work for the workers was very busy but in fact for the visitors it was quite a slower pace. People came and stayed a few hours so I could see. They sat there on the verandah for two hours and it wasn't something that you would miss.

Recording the observations

Yvonne: I'd like to ask you now about recording. You used diagrams and had some broad categories—how structured was that and were there other ways you recorded?

Cheryl: I wanted something that was obvious note-taking but not too obtrusive and clearly not tape recorders or anything like that. I used those little shorthand notebooks because on one side I'd put clear descriptions and the other side of the page I kept for analytical or interpretative notes or questions I had to follow-up—'This appears to be happening; I should check this out'. So I kept my analysis and ongoing interpretation of questions separate from pure description. I had a notebook for each unit. So I'd just record at the start the date, the time I arrived, the unit I was on, the shift and then I would write down what I saw. But it was always important, because I had this thing about space, to draw diagrams of who was where so I could remember it when I was analysing what was happening—to remember how long people spent out on the verandah without a staff member speaking to them.

Comments

An important message from both these examples is that observation can tell us things that other methods of data collection can't. Observation enables us to see events and interactions as they unfold, not filtered through someone else's perception of what is happening. It is those perceptions, of course, that observation cannot tell us about, hence the common practice in qualitative research of combining observation and interviews.

The examples also highlight the central roles of the observer, as both a filter of what is recorded and a part of the research context. Only what the observer notices and decides is relevant is recorded, and the observer in turn has an impact on the observational environment. Assumptions and biases need to be stated; while what is observed will always be filtered through the observer's mindset, it is also possible to take steps to minimise bias and inaccuracy in observation. Being conceptually clear about what is being observed can assist rigour and consistency in observation, as can taking seriously the physical limits of one's capacity to observe and later record.

In the following chapter, we consider some ways in which data collection approaches may be modified to suit the needs of particular groups of research participants.