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A GUIDE TO CONDUCTING FIELD OBSERVATIONS



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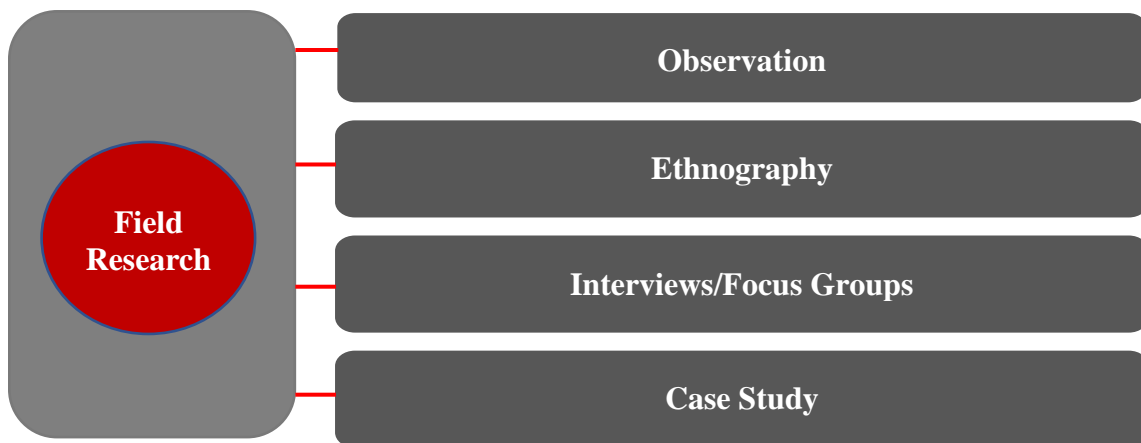
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Abstract: Observational research presents unique ethical, logistical, and legal challenges. This article provides an overview of observational research, including researchers' roles, data management and analysis, and ethical and legal responsibilities.

Introduction

Field research encompasses a broad set of qualitative data collection techniques taking place in “the field” or natural, non-laboratory settings. Field research includes observations, ethnographies to examine settings,¹ interviews and focus groups, and case studies (Figure 1). Researchers conduct direct observations in the field to gather data about places, behaviors, and interactions. This article offers tips for researchers to successfully collect, store, and analyze direct observation data. Also discussed are ethical and human subject considerations in observational research.

Figure 1
Field Research Types



Researcher Participation in Field Observations

When planning observational studies, researchers must decide the level and nature of their roles, including the extent to which they will participate and whether they will conduct open or covert observations. In making these decisions, researchers should consider the best approach to answer the research questions and the ethical and legal standards of human subjects research.

Participant or Observer

A researcher’s role may range from passive observer, to full, active participant (Figure 2). A passive observer is removed from and minimally interferes in the setting being studied. In contrast, a complete participant is fully immersed in and makes contributions to the study setting. A participant-observer, or moderate participant, is not an embedded in the setting as a general participant, but takes part in it unlike a passive observer. Each role presents unique challenges and advantages for the researcher. Participant-observers may have greater insights into the setting than a passive observer; however, they may inadvertently influence the setting or miss out on subtleties that they come to see as normal. Researchers’ roles may change within a single study as they adapt to the needs of the project. For this reason, it is best to think about participation as a continuum rather than a set of discrete categories.²

Figure 2
The Continuum of Researcher Participation in Field Observations



Should the Researcher Identify Themselves as a Researcher or be Covert?

In addition to levels of participation, researchers must decide whether to identify themselves or to covertly conduct observations. Covert observation may involve higher risk and potential deception, which must be justified before an Institutional Review Board (IRB),³ designed to protect the rights and welfare of human research subjects.⁴ IRBs consider ethical issues in research, as well as review, monitor, and give approval for research projects.⁵

In criminology, covert observation might be appropriate when studying stigmatized behaviors or environments. For example, in one study, a researcher relied on covert observation to examine crime-control policies in an entertainment district.⁶ The researcher argued that revealing their objective or identity would have influenced people's behavior in the setting. Researchers can conduct covert observations both in-person and from off-site. In one study, researchers set up closed-circuit television cameras to examine consumer behavior and offender profiling in a retail store.⁷ The store employees were aware of the cameras, while the shoppers were not.

Recording Field Data

When conducting field observations, researchers should record, manage, and analyze field observations with consistency and rigor. To do so, researchers should keep a field record, which includes notes, audio-visual records, and any other forms of data collection.

Field Notes

Good descriptive field notes are factual and comprehensive and may capture information about the physical setting, participants, dialogues, activities, and behaviors. Researchers may develop an observation protocol to follow in the field or to fill in post-observation to assist in developing a set of comprehensive, useful notes, (Figure 3). The protocol should include relevant details describing each field entry. In addition, it should reflect the notes for each day or session. Field observations include descriptive and reflective notes. Descriptive notes answer the *what, who, when, how* questions. Reflective notes capture the researcher's thoughts, ideas, questions, and inferences to track the evolution of their understanding about the research topic.⁸

Figure 3
Example of an Observation Protocol

Date:	Time:
Duration of the Meeting:	Site:
Participants:	
Documents passed:	
Notes	
Descriptive: Description of participants, activities, interactions, and events Reflective: Questions to self, observations of nonverbal behavior, interpretations/inferences	

Adapted from Johnson, L. *Community-based qualitative research* (pp. 104-119). SAGE Publications, Inc, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071802809>

Other Data Records

In addition to field notes, a researcher may add visual, audio, or archival data as part of field observations.⁹ The researcher may create them (e.g., by audio-taping a discussion) or collect information that already exists (e.g., a brochure). These records include:

- **Audio recordings.** Recording discussions can help the researcher focus on reflective and descriptive note-taking outside contents of a discussion.¹⁰
- **Video recordings.** Observations can be videotaped. The researcher may also review public camera records or analyze video documents (i.e. trainings, interviews, parades, and social media postings).
- **Images/photographs.** The researcher may take pictures of the settings or use archival images. Photographs help document special or unplanned events, such as festivals or natural disasters. Visual documents, such as leaflets and media campaigns, can make clear assumptions, stereotypes, and cultural narratives of a space or a group.
- **Archives and documents.** Researchers may use documents passed out at meetings, brochures, emails, letters, memoranda, and other textual or visual information. Those can turn into focal points in the analysis phase.

Data Management and Analysis

Field observation along with supplemental data can be voluminous, unorganized, and overwhelming. To systematically analyze field observation data, researchers should develop an organizational scheme. Organized notes should be securely stored to protect confidential

information, either via locked cabinet in a secure office or digitally on a password-protected computer.¹¹

Analysis

Qualitative field observation data, including field notes and recordings, are most frequently analyzed in text or written format.¹² Researchers, their staff, or a transcription service may transcribe audio or video recordings to text files.¹³

Qualitative data analysis (QDA) software supports data management and analysis. NVivo and Atlas.ti are popular choices among social science researchers. Other options include Microsoft OneNote, Scrivener, Dedoose, and QDA Miner Lite. Researchers should investigate strengths and weaknesses of each option before identifying the one that would best fit their needs. For simpler projects, researchers may opt for manual data analysis versus a software solution.¹⁴

Ethical and Legal Consideration

Researchers also must consider the ethical and legal considerations of their field observations.¹⁵ Covert observations are particularly controversial because they involve deception. When researchers are heavily immersed in the field observations and become close to their subjects, they run the risk of blurring the line between researcher and participant.¹⁶

Informed consent is obtained after a researcher offers information about a study and gains permission from an individual to participate. Observations in public space may not require informed consent. However, the U.S. Office for Human Research Protection defines public space by the extent to which potential participants might have a reasonable expectation of privacy.¹⁷ There are no absolute distinctions between public and private spaces and researchers should collaborate with their IRBs to make define them on case by case bases.

Conclusion

Direct observation is a type of fieldwork well suited exploring norms, behaviors, and interactions in a natural setting. In observational projects, the researcher can adopt roles across the spectrum of participation, from passive observer to active participant. Researchers also may conduct identified or covert observations, depending on the needs of their projects. Observational research yields extensive amounts of data in various forms that requires careful storage and management. Researchers can analyze the data manually or with the help of QDA software. Observational research presents unique ethical, logistical, and legal challenges that can be managed with input by IRBs.

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