

University of Djilali Bounaama Khemis Miliana

Dep : Human & Social Sciences

Stream :Counseling& Guidance

Year :2022 /2023

Level : Master1

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Specific aims :

By the end of the lesson students will be able to :

- Grasp the meaning and types of observational techniques.
- Develop an understanding of issues surrounding collecting, analysing and interpreting observational data and understanding of how observational research can be refined by use of behavioural categories.
- Outline event and time sampling.
- Explain how to implement event and time sampling.
- Design an observational activity using event sampling.

LESSON FOUR:OBSERVATIONAL TECHNIQUES

Observational techniques. Types of observation: naturalistic and controlled observation; covert and overt observation; participant and non-participant observation.

The experimental method may not always provide the most suitable way to study a particular behaviour. There are a number of non-experimental methods available to psychologists, one of which is observation.

On this course we consider the different types of observational method, as well as the strengths and limitations of each.

One important non-experimental method is **observation**. Observations provide psychologists with a way of seeing what people do without having to ask them. They also allow researchers to study observable behaviour within a natural or controlled setting . This method allows a researcher the ability to study more complex interactions between variables in a more natural way.

Note that observation is often used within an experiment as a way, for example, of

assessing the **dependent variable**

Types Of Observation

Naturalistic and controlled observations

Naturalistic observations take place in the setting or context where the target behaviour would usually occur. All aspects of the environment are free to vary.

For

instance, it would not make sense to study how senior management and employees

in a particular factory interact by dragging the whole of the workforce into an artificial **lab** setting. It is much better to study 'interaction' in the factory environment where it would normally take place.

It is sometimes useful to control certain aspects of the research situation, so a **controlled observation** may be preferred. For example, Mary Ainsworth made use

of a controlled observation as part of her **Strange Situation** studies.

In a controlled observation there is some control over variables, including manipulating variables to observe effects and also control of **extraneous variables**.

Covert and overt observations

Behaviour may occasionally be recorded without first obtaining the consent of the

participants. **Covert observations** are those in which the participants are unaware

they are the focus of study and their behaviour is observed in secret, say from across a room or from a balcony (but rarely from behind a bush). Such behaviour must be public and happening anyway if the observation is to be ethical.

In contrast, **overt observations** are when participants know their behaviour is being observed and have given their **informed consent** beforehand.

Participant and non-participant observation

In most cases an observer is merely watching (or listening to) the behaviour of others and acts as a **non-participant**. The observer observes from a distance and does not interact with the people being observed.

Sometimes it may be necessary for the observer to become part of the group they are studying, as is the case with **participant observations**.

Structuring Observations

Unstructured observations

The researcher records all relevant behaviour but has no system. The most obvious problem with this is that there may be too much to record. Another problem is that the behaviours recorded will often be those which are most visible or eye-catching to the observer but these may not necessarily be the most important or relevant behaviours.

Structured observations

Observational techniques, like all research techniques, aim to be objective and rigorous. For this reason it is preferable to use **structured observations**, i.e. various 'systems' to organise observations. The two main ways to structure observations are using **behavioural categories** and **sampling** procedures.

Behavioural categories

One of the hardest aspects of the observational method is deciding how different behaviours should be categorised. This is because our perception of behaviour is often seamless; when we watch somebody perform a particular action we see a continuous stream of action rather than a series of separate behavioural components.

In order to conduct systematic observations, a researcher needs to break up this stream of behaviour into different behavioural categories. What is needed is **operationalisation** – breaking the behaviour being studied into a set of components. For example, when observing infant behaviour, we can have a list including things such as smiling, crying, sleeping, etc., or, when observing facial expressions, including different combinations of mouth, cheeks, eyebrows, etc.

Sampling procedures

When conducting an unstructured observation the observer should record every instance of the behaviour in as much detail as possible. This is useful if the behaviours of interest do not occur very often. However, in many situations, continuous observation is not possible because there would be too much data to record, therefore there must be a systematic method of sampling observations:

- **Event sampling** Counting the number of times a certain behaviour (event) occurs in a target individual or individuals, for example counting how many times a person smiles in a ten minute period.
- **Time sampling** Recording behaviours in a given time frame. For example, noting what a target individual is doing every 30 seconds or some other time interval. At that time the observer may tick one or more categories from a checklist.

Evaluation

In all observations it is not possible to establish cause and effect.

Naturalistic and controlled observations

Naturalistic observations tend to have high **external validity** insofar as findings can often be generalised to everyday life, as the behaviour is studied within the environment where it would normally occur. That said, the lack of control over the research situation makes **replication** of the investigation difficult. There may also be many uncontrolled **extraneous variables** that make it more difficult to judge any pattern of behaviour. Controlled observations, in contrast, may produce findings that cannot be as readily applied to real-life settings. Extraneous variables may be less of a factor so replication of the observation becomes easier.

Covert and overt observations

The fact that participants do not know they are being watched removes the problem of **participant reactivity** and ensures any behaviour observed will be natural. This increases the **validity** of the data gathered.

However, the **ethics** of these studies may be questioned as people, even in public, may not wish to have their behaviours noted down.

Participant and non-participant observations

In participant observations, the researcher can experience the situation as the participants do; giving them increased insight into the lives of the people being studied. This may increase the validity of the findings.

There is a danger, however, that the researcher may come to identify too strongly with those they are studying and lose **objectivity**. Some researchers refer to this as 'going native' when the line between being a researcher and being a participant becomes blurred.

Non-participant observations allow the researcher to maintain an objective psychological distance from their participants so there is less danger of them 'going native'. However, they may lose the valuable insight to be gained in a participant observation as they are too far removed from the people and behaviour they are studying.

Structured versus unstructured

Structured observations that involve the use of behavioural categories make the recording of data easier and more systematic.

The data produced is likely to be *numerical*, which means that analysing and comparing the behaviour observed between participants is more straightforward. In contrast, **unstructured observations** tend to produce **qualitative data**, which may be much more difficult to record and analyse.

However, unstructured observations benefit from more richness and depth of detail in the data collected. Though there may be a greater risk of **observer bias** with unstructured observations, as the objective behavioural categories that are a feature of structured observations are not present here. The researcher may only record those behaviours that ‘catch their eye’ and these may not be the most important or useful.

Behavioural categories

Although the use of behavioural categories can make data collection more structured and objective, it is important that such categories are as clear and unambiguous as possible. They must be *observable, measurable* and *self-evident*. In other words, they should not require further interpretation. Researchers should also ensure that all possible forms of the target behaviour are included in the checklist. There should not be a ‘dustbin category’ in which many different behaviours are deposited. Finally, categories should be exclusive and not overlap; for instance, the difference between ‘smiling’ and ‘grinning’ would be very difficult to discern.

Sampling methods

Event sampling is useful when the target behaviour or event happens quite infrequently and could be missed if time sampling was used. However, if the specified event is too complex, the observer may overlook important details if using event sampling.

Time sampling is effective in reducing the number of observations that have to be made. That said, those instances when behaviour is sampled might be unrepresentative of the observation as a whole