

## CHALLENGES OF OBSERVATIONAL METHODS IN HUMANITIES

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### **Abstract**

Observational research is a qualitative research technique used for over a century in variety of disciplines in the Social Sciences. It is used to collect information by observing the subjects in a natural environment and analyzing the information. The paper adopts the phenomenological approach. This paper, therefore aims at describing the observational research technique and its challenges in the humanities. It also argues that a critical analysis of observational research technique has some notable challenges in the field of humanities. The study discovers that, although observational research has the advantage of probing social life in its natural habitat and thus providing a deeper and fuller understanding of social phenomena, the method also has methodological and ethical problems. The methodological problems associated with observation include the possibility of observer bias while the ethical problem has to do with the violation of the norm of informed consent of the respondents being studied. The study therefore recommends among other things that for an effective and hitch free use of observational research method, attention must be given to these challenges and ways of overcoming them.

**Key Words:** Challenges; Observation; Research; Humanities

### **Introduction**

The field of humanities entails the study of the human world and society from critical perspective. <sup>1</sup> They are those branches of knowledge that concern themselves with human beings and their culture or with analytic and critical methods of inquiry derived from an appreciation of human values and of the unique ability of the human spirit to express itself. <sup>2</sup> The field of humanities includes studies of that qualitatively, rather than quantitatively that investigate

the human experience.<sup>3</sup> These branches include law, language, philosophy, religion and mythology, international relations, gender and women's studies, popular culture and art and music.<sup>4</sup>

As a group of educational discipline, the humanities are distinguished in content and method from physical and biological sciences and somewhat less decisively from social sciences. Science and mathematics may be said to employ objective and empirical methods to investigate the natural world. In contrast, the humanities are the studies that use subject and rational methods to investigate the human world. The tools of humanities are not controlled by experiments and precise measurement, they are rational analysis, emotional insight and imagination. Research in the humanities can be accomplished through a surprising diverse range of methods yet not all do that without encountering reasonable challenges in the process. The following are some of the research methods commonly used in the field of humanities to investigate the human world. They include qualitative research, ethnography research, content analysis, action research, case study, focus group, historical method, field research, grounded theory, hermeneutics, critical discourse analysis and observational research. Our focus in this paper will be fully on the observational method. This paper attempts to describe and critically examine the challenges of observational research technique in the humanities. The paper started with description of observational research technique, and how it is conducted. Different types of observational research were identified, described and critically examined, exposing the challenges in the field of humanities.

### **Concept of Observational Research**

Various scholars have at one time or the other attempted to define observational research from different perspectives. According to Given, observational research

is a type of qualitative study that involves collecting impressions of the world using all of one's sense, especially looking and listening, in a systematic and purposeful way to learn about a phenomenon of interest.<sup>5</sup> The term observational research is used to refer to several different types of non-experimental studies in which behavior is systematically observed and recorded.<sup>6</sup> The goal of observational research is to describe a variable or set of variables. Observational research is a qualitative research technique used for over a century in variety of disciplines in the Social Sciences, particularly in anthropological (ethnographic) studies.<sup>7</sup> It is used to collect information by observing the subjects in a natural environment and then analyzing the information. This could be by observing wild animals from behind, shoppers in a market or supermarket, students in a classroom, footballers in a football pitch. Observational method is based on behavior patterns, psychological charity, attitude and beliefs of the subject etc. Observational method also consists of watching, listening, touching and recording the behavior, attitude and character of objects or phenomena or living beings. Observational research simply requires accurate description and objective interpretation but with no prior hypotheses. To this effect, Cozby opines that in observation, "if a researcher has some prior reason to criticize people in the setting or give a glowing report of a particular group, the observation will likely be biased and the conclusion will lack objectivity."<sup>8</sup> However, observational research allows the researcher to see what their subjects really do when confronted with various choices or situations. By using this method, the researchers try to understand and comprehend the behavior and psychological character of the said subject. In observational research, variables are not created or manipulated. Though subject's may or may not be aware of the presence of the researcher, the researcher do not try to control the variables (as in an experiment), or ask participants to respond to direct questions (as in an interview or survey study). Observation is one of the simplest methods of

research you can use or think about. For a better understanding of observation and its impending challenges in the field of humanities, it is better we further discuss the various methods of observation, discussing their feature as well as the challenges of each method.

### **Types of Observational Method of Data Collection**

There is no universally acceptable categorization of observational research. Scholars identified different types of observational research from different perspectives. This paper attempts to look at and discuss some of them under the following headings: naturalistic observation, participant observation, structured observation and case studies.

#### **Naturalistic Observation**

Naturalistic observation is used to observe people in their natural setting, thus naturalistic observation is a type of field research (as opposed to a type of laboratory research). According to Fraise;

The simplest form of observational research involves documenting what is seen. Naturalistic observation has no intervention by a researcher. It is simply studying behaviors that occur naturally in natural settings. Importantly, in naturalistic observation, there is no attempt to manipulate variables, as one would when comparing results between a control group and an experimental group<sup>9</sup>.

There are two forms of naturalistic observation, the disguised and the undisguised. In the disguised observation, the subjects are unaware of the researcher's presence and monitoring of their behaviors. While in the

undisguised observation the participants are aware of the researcher's intentions and actions especially in a place where it is not ethical or practical to conduct disguised naturalistic observation. The problem associated with undisguised naturalistic observation is that it has a great influence over the behavior of the subjects. Once the participants are aware of the researcher's intentions, they automatically change their behaviors.

### **Participant Observation**

Participant observation is also an aspect of observational research. It is similar to naturalistic observation, except that the researcher is part of the natural environment they are observing. It involves becoming an active member of the group being observed. Also in this type of study, the researcher is concerned with the rituals or cultural practices where they can only determine the value by actually experiencing them firsthand. A very good example to this, is the fact that you cannot be acquainted with the rule of the game, example Baseball game without participation. A major aspect of this participant observation is that it makes participation compulsory for the researcher into the group to observe that otherwise would not be accessible by observing from afar. In participant observation deep and rich data can be accessed through direct observation and interaction with subjects. More so, the research participants may alter their behaviors if they know that they are being observed.

### **Structured Observation**

Structured or other words called systematic observation is another observation method. According to Given, Structured observation entails the collection of data according to a set of predefined rules and procedures and the structure of that observation as well as its predefined variables and their values are derived from the purpose of the study.<sup>10</sup> It involves coding a small number of behaviors in a

quantitative manner. In this case the researcher makes careful observations of one or more unique behavior in a particular setting that is more structured than the setting used in naturalistic and participant observation. It is also similar to naturalistic observation and participant observation in that in all cases the researchers are observing naturally the manifesting behaviors. However good structured observation exist, there are yet some challenges to be encountered when using it. According to Given<sup>11</sup>, there are four challenges associated with structured observation: First, the method is not appropriate for a research topic about which little is known, as the method requires prior knowledge of the setting for the development of observation schedules. Second, unlike more flexible forms of observation such as participant or unstructured observation, structured observation, with its predefined variables and process, is not effective in capturing behavior or other features of a research context that are not expected. Third, reactivity (observer effect) can be a major problem. Reactivity takes place when the act of doing the research changes the behavior of the participants. Fourth, structured observation is difficult to implement in busy, complex, settings where it may be hard for observers to focus on particular behaviors though this challenge can be overcome to some extent through the use of multiple observers, however, the presence of multiple observers may increase reactivity). Moreover, this structured observation requires well-trained observers who are experts with the method and can understand what they are observing.

### **Case Study Observation**

Case study is another type of observational research. The case study is a particular type of observational research focusing on a single phenomenon (e.g., person, event, etc.). It can be considered as a naturalistic observation as it collects data in the field. However, where other studies may have a broader lens that seeks to document everything that occurs within the researcher's perception, case

studies focus on a specific point of reference, such as an individual or event. For example, case studies looking at individual patients may seek to determine how they cope with a particular disease or treatment. A case study is an in-depth examination of an individual, group, or event and can be natural or participatory. Sometimes case study is completed in social units (e.g. a cult) and events (e.g. a natural disaster). However, a case study provides a detailed description and analysis of an individual.

### **Challenges of Observational Method**

The observational method as we can see from the discussions above is one of the simplest and yet the most awkward of all research methods, depending on the implementation.<sup>12</sup> Observation is simply that, observing folks using documents or working in a given workplace. Sometimes bordering on ethnographic research, observation can be a tool that you use to figure out how folks are working and using systems and texts without intruding into their workflow. You simply sit back and observe the situation, taking notes of things as they happen.

### **Lacks Structure**

One common critique of observational research is that it lacks the structure inherent to experimental research, which has concepts such as selection bias and interpreter reliability to ensure research quality. On the other hand, qualitative research relies on the assumption that the study and its data are presented transparently and honestly. Under this principle, researchers are responsible for convincing their audiences that the assertions they make are connected empirically to the observations they have made and the data they have collected.

### **Lack of Competence of the Observer**

The observers understanding of customer behavior must be clear. They should be free from bias and have a reliable frame of reference. The observers incompetence could compromise the validity and reliability of the observation.

### **All cases in observation may not be observed**

These issues develop because of the events uncertainty. Numerous social events have a very ambiguous nature. Finding their time and location is a challenging assignment for the researcher. The incident might occur without the observer present. On the other hand, it might not happen even if the observer is always present. For instance, it is never certain if two people or group will argue or fight. The exact date of the event is still being determined. Moreover, everything may not be observed. There are various personal behaviors and secrets which the researcher does not observe. Many respondents refuse to let researchers observe their activities, and due to this reason, not everything is observed by the researcher. It also becomes difficult to gather information about an individual's personal opinions and preferences. It is also very difficult to remember past life, thereby it remains unknown. The observation method has no technique to study the subject's past life. It is tough to gather information about past life if the subject is not cooperative enough. Since no other option is available, researchers have to rely on documents that are not always accurate.

### **Not all events give themselves over to Observational Research**

Most social phenomena are conceptual and may not be easily identified. For instance, parents feelings of love, affection, and emotion for their children are not visible to our senses and cannot be measured using observational methods. To explore these phenomena, the researcher may use additional techniques like case studies, interviews, etc.



### **Lack of Clarity**

The observer often prefers to focus on what he wants to see. People may have different perspectives on what is happening even when exposed to identical conditions. The specifics that different witnesses who witnessed the same incident report are influenced by their strong personal interests, emotions, motivations, etc. For example, the seven blind men that were asked to describe an elephant. They all described the elephant actually but from their different perspectives.

### **Problem of Forgetfulness**

To construct his observation, an observer must rely on his recollection. In such circumstances, he ought to note his observation right away. Therefore, improper documentation negates the fundamental objective of observation. This may happen as a result of forgetfulness or as a result of inability to recollect fast.

### **Potential for Distortion**

Being observed interferes with oneself. The act of observation itself carries the risk of distorting the phenomenon. It introduces a bias unknowable in terms of its direction and magnitude. It is challenging to get rid of this distortion. But it can be lessened by correct selection and placement of observers, an appropriate choice of observers and their location, covert recording, and other efforts to prove observer neutrality.

### **Lack of Reliability**

According to Young, no attempt is made to employ precise instruments during observation to verify the accuracy of the phenomenon<sup>13</sup>. Generalizations drawn using the observation approach are not very trustworthy because social

phenomena cannot be controlled or subjected to laboratory experiments. Again, drawing meaningful conclusions from observation is challenging due to the relative nature of social phenomena and the observers own bias.

### **Improper Perception**

Observation requires an elevated level of technical skill. One can never be certain that what they are seeing is what they think they are seeing. The same phenomenon could be viewed differently by two people. A scenario could offer something significant and helpful to one individual while offering nothing to another. Only observers who possess the necessary technical expertise can make scientific observations.

### **Personal bias of the observer**

The spectators may have their moral standards or distinct preconceptions about an incident, which renders sociological research objective. The methodological problems associated with observation include the possibility of observer bias while the ethical problem has to do with the violation of the norm of informed consent of the respondents being studied.

### **Slow Research**

Young is correct when he says that valid observations cannot be hastened, and that observation alone cannot allow us to complete our inquiry quickly. It can occasionally make the observer, and the observed less interested in continuing their observation procedure.<sup>14</sup>

### **Very Much Expensive**

It costs a lot, takes a lot of time, and demands a lot of work. Traveling, lodging at the location of the phenomenon, and purchasing expensive equipment are all

necessary for observation. It is regarded as one of the most expensive ways of data collection as a result. Most times, in some observational studies, researchers can't control the environment. That means they have to wait patiently for the customer to perform a task and collect data, resulting in a lot of dead time due to inactivity. It is purely at the participant's discretion and will.

### **Ineffective Approach**

The complete answers "cannot be gathered by observation alone" according to Young<sup>15</sup>. As a result, several people recommended that observation needs to be supported by additional techniques.

### **Difficulty in Verifying Validity**

Many observational phenomena are difficult to define precisely enough to allow for the creation of useful generalizations. The validity and reliability of the observation may need to be improved by the observer's incompetence.

### **Recommendations**

Looking at the challenges facing effective use of observational method in the field of humanities, the study recommends among many others that; There should be a very high level of competence or mastery of what observational research method requires. This will in no small measure reduce the level of compromise on the validity and reliability of the observation.

In terms of bias which leads to distortion information, this can be lessened by correct selection and placement of observers, an appropriate choice of observers and their location, covert recording, and other efforts to prove observer neutrality.

An elevated level of technical skill is required. One can never be certain that what they are seeing is what they think they are seeing. It is only observers who possess the necessary technical expertise can make scientific observations.

### **Conclusion**

Observational research is a research technique that is used in a variety of disciplines. It is an old method of data collection used in social process over time. The method is widely used by anthropologists especially by ethnographers. The method seem to be the simplest as it has advantage of studying natural behavior as they occur in a natural setting. However, Observation has methodological and ethical problems. The methodological problems associated with observation include the possibility of observer bias while the ethical problem has to do with the violation of the norm of informed consent of the respondents being studied.

### **Endnotes**

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