

The Power of Observation

Pre-Workshop Suggestions

Here are ideas to get you started for our May 31st workshop on observation in program evaluation. If you have or use an existing observation protocol, please bring it to this workshop.

- **Selected reading (begins below)**
- **10-minute observation in an area of interest** (public setting, staff meeting, fieldtrip, professional development experience, play ground). Take 10 minutes to soak in your surroundings and *record* this experience. Where are you? *Describe*. What is happening? *Be specific*. Who is being observed? In parenthesis note any of your strong reactions, emotions, and thoughts about what you are observing. After the 10-minute observation, reflect on what you observed. Note these reflections. How did you organize your notes? What made sense? What was challenging?
- **Workshop Agenda**
Clarify the role program observations play in program inquiry / learning (5 – 10 minutes)
Highlight examples and processes from EE and other fields (20 minutes)
Dive in - collectively work on content area and design for your work (25-30 minutes)

Participant Observation as a Data Collection by Barbara B. Kawulich

The following excerpt is from Kawulich, Barbara B. (2005, May). Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method [81 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(2), Art. 43. Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/2-05/05-2-43e.htm>

How Does One Conduct an Observation?

WHYTE (1979) notes that, while there is no one way that is best for conducting research using participant observation, the most effective work is done by researchers who view informants as collaborators; to do otherwise, he adds, is a waste of human resources. His emphasis is on the relationship between the researcher and informants as collaborative researchers who, through building solid relationships, improve the research process and improve the skills of the researcher to conduct research. [29]

Conducting observations involves a variety of activities and considerations for the researcher, which include ethics, establishing rapport, selecting key informants, the processes for conducting observations, deciding what and when to observe, keeping field notes, and writing up one's findings. In this section, these aspects of the research activities are discussed in more detail. [30]

The processes of conducting observations

Exactly how does one go about conducting observation? WERNER and SCHOEPFLE (1987, as cited in ANGROSINO & dePEREZ, 2000) focus on the process of conducting observations and describe three types of processes:

1. The first is *descriptive observation*, in which one observes anything and everything, assuming that he/she knows nothing; the disadvantage of this type is that it can lead to the collection of minutiae that may or may not be relevant to the study.
2. The second type, *focused observation*, emphasizes observation supported by interviews, in which the participants' insights guide the researcher's decisions about what to observe.

3. The third type of observation, considered by ANGROSINO and DePEREZ to be the most systematic, is *selective observation*, in which the researcher focuses on different types of activities to help delineate the differences in those activities (ANGROSINO & dePEREZ, 2000, p.677). [42]

Other researchers have taken a different approach to explaining how to conduct observations. For example, MERRIAM (1988) developed an observation guide in which she compiled various elements to be recorded in field notes. The first of these elements includes the physical environment. This involves observing the surroundings of the setting and providing a written description of the context. Next, she describes the participants in detail. Then she records the activities and interactions that occur in the setting. She also looks at the frequency and duration of those activities/interactions and other subtle factors, such as informal, unplanned activities, symbolic meanings, nonverbal communication, physical clues, and what should happen that has not happened. In her 1998 book, MERRIAM adds such elements as observing the conversation in terms of content, who speaks to whom, who listens, silences, the researcher's own behavior and how that role affects those one is observing, and what one says or thinks. [43]

To conduct participant observation, one must live in the context to facilitate prolonged engagement; prolonged engagement is one of the activities listed by LINCOLN and GUBA (1994) to establish trustworthiness. The findings are considered to be more trustworthy, when the researcher can show that he/she spent a considerable amount of time in the setting, as this prolonged interaction with the community enables the researcher to have more opportunities to observe and participate in a variety of activities over time. The reader would not view the findings as credible, if the researcher only spent a week in the culture; however, he/she would be more assured that the findings are accurate, if the researcher lived in the culture for an extended time or visited the culture repeatedly over time. Living in the culture enables one to learn the language and participate in everyday activities. Through these activities, the researcher has access to community members who can explain the meaning that such activities hold for them as individuals and can use conversations to elicit data in lieu of more formal interviews. [44]

When I was preparing to conduct my ethnographic study with the Muscogee (Creek) women of Oklahoma, my professor, Valerie FENNELL, told me that I should take the attitude of "treat me like a little child who knows nothing," so that my informants would teach me what I needed to know about the culture. I found this attitude to be very helpful in establishing rapport, in getting the community members to explain things they thought I should know, and in inviting me to observe activities that they felt were important for my understanding of their culture. DeWALT and DeWALT support the view of the ethnographer as an apprentice, taking the stance of a child in need of teaching about the cultural mores as a means for enculturation. KOTTAK (1994) defines enculturation as "the social process by which culture is learned and transmitted across generations" (p.16). Conducting observations involves such activities as "fitting in, active seeing, short-term memory, informal interviewing, recording detailed field notes, and, perhaps most importantly, patience" (DeWALT & DeWALT, 2002, p.17). DeWALT and DeWALT extend this list of necessary skills, adding MEAD's suggested activities, which include developing tolerance to poor conditions and unpleasant situations, resisting impulsiveness,

particularly interrupting others, and resisting attachment to particular factions or individuals. [45]

ANGROSINO and DePEREZ (2000) advocate using a structured observation process to maximize the efficiency of the field experience, minimize researcher bias, and facilitate replication or verification by others, all of which make the findings more objective. This objectivity, they explain, occurs when there is agreement between the researcher and the participants as to what is going on. Sociologists, they note, typically use document analysis to check their results, while anthropologists tend to verify their findings through participant observation. [46]

BERNARD (1994) states that most basic anthropological research is conducted over a period of about a year, but recently there have been participant observations that were conducted in a matter of weeks. In these instances, he notes the use of rapid assessment techniques that include "going in and getting on with the job of collection data without spending months developing rapport. This means going into a field situation armed with a lot of questions that you want to answer and perhaps a checklist of data that you need to collect" (p.139). [47] In this instance the cultural members are taken into the researcher's confidence as research partners to enable him/her to get the questions answered. BERNARD notes that those anthropologists who are in the field for extended periods of time are better able to obtain information of a sensitive nature, such as information about witchcraft, sexuality, political feuds, etc. By staying involved with the culture over a period of years, data about social changes that occur over time are more readily perceived and understood. [48]

BERNARD and his associates developed an outline of the stages of participant observation fieldwork that includes initial contact; shock; discovering the obvious; the break; focusing; exhaustion, the second break, and frantic activity; and leaving. In ethnographic research, it is common for the researcher to live in the culture under study for extended periods of time and to return home for short breaks, then return to the research setting for more data collection. When the researcher encounters a culture that is different from his/her own and lives in that culture, constantly being bombarded by new stimuli, culture shock results. Researchers react differently to such shock. Some may sit in their motel room and play cards or read novels to escape. Others may work and rework data endlessly. Sometimes the researcher needs to take a break from the constant observation and note taking to recuperate. When I conducted my dissertation fieldwork, I stayed in a local motel, although I had been invited to stay at the home of some community members. I chose to remain in the motel, because this enabled me to have the down time in the evenings that I needed to write up field notes and code and analyze data. Had I stayed with friends, they may have felt that they had to entertain me, and I would have felt obligated to spend my evenings conversing or participating in whatever activities they had planned, when I needed some time to myself to be alone, think, and "veg" out. [49]

The aspects of conducting observations are discussed above, but these are not the only ways to conduct observations. DeMUNCK and SOBO use *freelisting* to elicit from cultural members items related to specific categories of information. Through freelisting, they build a dictionary of coded responses to explain various categories. They also suggest the use of pile sorting, which involves the use of cards that

participants sort into piles according to similar topics. The process involves making decisions about what topics to include. Such card pile sorting processes are easy to administer and may be meaningful to the participant's world and frames of reference (DeMUNCK & SOBO, 1998). [50]

A different approach to observation, *consensus analysis*, is a method DeMUNCK and SOBO describe to design sampling frames for ethnographic research, enabling the researcher to establish the viewpoints of the participants from the inside out. This involves aspects of ethnographic fieldwork, such as getting to know participants intimately to understand their way of thinking and experiencing the world. It further involves verifying information gathered to determine if the researcher correctly understood the information collected. ***The question of whether one has understood correctly lends itself to the internal validity question of whether the researcher has correctly understood the participants.*** Whether the information can be generalized addresses the external validity in terms of whether the interpretation is transferable from the sample to the population from which it was selected. DeMUNCK and SOBO note that the ethnographer begins with a topic and discusses that topic with various people who know about it. He/She selects a variety of people who know about the topic to include in the sample, remembering that not everyone has the same opinion or experience about the topic. They suggest using a nested sampling frame to determine differences in knowledge about a topic. To help determine the differences, the researcher should ask the participants if they know people who have a different experience or opinion of the topic. Seeking out participants with different points of view enables the researcher to fully flesh out understanding of the topic in that culture. DeMUNCK and SOBO also suggest talking with anyone who is willing to teach you. [51]

Tips for Collecting Useful Observation Data

TAYLOR and BOGDAN (1984) provided several tips for conducting observations after one has gained entry into the setting under study. They suggest that the researcher should:

- be unobtrusive in dress and actions;
- become familiar with the setting before beginning to collect data;
- keep the observations short at first to keep from becoming overwhelmed;
- be honest, but not too technical or detailed, in explaining to participants what he/she is doing. [52]

MERRIAM (1998) adds that the researcher should:

- pay attention, shifting from a "wide" to a "narrow" angle perspective, focusing on a single person, activity, interaction, then returning to a view of the overall situation;
- look for key words in conversations to trigger later recollection of the conversation content;
- concentrate on the first and last remarks of a conversation, as these are most easily remembered;
- during breaks in the action, mentally replay remarks and scenes one has observed. [53]

DeWALT and DeWALT (2002) make these suggestions:

- Actively observe, attending to details one wants to record later.

- Look at the interactions occurring in the setting, including who talks to whom, whose opinions are respected, how decisions are made. Also observe where participants stand or sit, particularly those with power versus those with less power or men versus women.
- Counting persons or incidents of observed activity is useful in helping one recollect the situation, especially when viewing complex events or events in which there are many participants.
- Listen carefully to conversations, trying to remember as many verbatim conversations, nonverbal expressions, and gestures as possible. To assist in seeing events with "new eyes," turn detailed jottings into extensive field notes, including spatial maps and interaction maps. Look carefully to seek out new insights.
- Keep a running observation record. [54]

WOLCOTT (2001) adds to the discussion of how to conduct observations. He suggests that, to move around gracefully within the culture, one should:

- practice reciprocity in whatever terms are appropriate for that culture;
- be tolerant of ambiguity; this includes being adaptable and flexible;
- have personal determination and faith in oneself to help alleviate culture shock.
- When one is not sure what to attend to, he/she should look to see what it is that he/she is attending to and try to determine how and why one's attention has been drawn as it has. One should take note of what he/she is observing, what is being put into the field notes and in how much detail, and what one is noting about the researcher's personal experience in conducting the research. The process of note taking is not complete until one has reviewed his/her notes to make sure that he/she is coupling the analysis with observations throughout the process to keep the researcher on track.
- Being attentive for any length of time is difficult to do. One tends to do it off and on. One should be aware that his/her attention to details comes in short bursts that are followed by inattentive rests, and those moments of attention should be capitalized upon.
- One should reflect on the note taking process and subsequent writing-up practices as a critical part of fieldwork, making it part of the daily routine, keeping the entries up to date. The elaborated note taking also provides a connection between what he/she is experiencing and how he/she is translating that experience into a form that can be communicated to others. He/she should make a habit of including in one's field notes such specifics as day, date, and time, along with a simple coding system for keeping track of entries, and reflections on and about one's mood, personal reactions, and random thoughts, as these may help to recapture detail not written down. One should also consider beginning to do some writing as fieldwork proceeds. One should take time frequently to draft expanded pieces written using "thick description," as described by GEERTZ (1973), so that such details might later be incorporated into the final write up.
- One should take seriously the challenge of participating and focus, when appropriate, on one's role as participant over one's role as observer. Fieldwork involves more than data gathering. It may also involve informal interviews, conversations, or more structured interviews, such as questionnaires or surveys. [56]

BERNARD notes that one must become explicitly aware, being attentive in his/her observations, reporting what is seen, not inferred. It is natural to impose on a situation what is culturally correct, in the absence of real memories, but practicing reliable observation can enhance building memory capacity. If the data one collects is not reliable, the conclusions will not be valid. BERNARD advises that the researcher not talk to anyone after observing, until he/she has written down his/her field notes. He advocates that he/she try to remember things in historical/ chronological order and draw a map of the physical space to help him/her remember details. He also suggests that the researcher maintain naiveté, assuming an attitude of learner and being guided by participants' teaching without being considered stupid, incompetent, or dangerous to their wellbeing. Sometimes, he points out, one's expertise is what helps to establish rapport. Having good writing skills, that is, writing concisely and compellingly, is also necessary to good participant observation. The researcher must learn to 'hang out' to enable him/her to ask questions when appropriate and to ask appropriate questions. Maintaining one's objectivity means realizing and acknowledging one's biases, assumptions, prejudices, opinions, and values. [57]