

Observation

Source: Marcus and Ducklin (1998) *Success in Sociology*

Observation as a method of gathering data can be either direct (overt), referred to as non-participant observation, or indirect (covert), usually called participant observation. In the former, those observed know they are being studied; in the latter, the observer (researcher) behaves as one of the group.

Observational studies offer particular insights into social behaviour where a lengthy period of observation is possible: for example, working as a teacher and covertly observing staffroom culture. John Williams, and others, have used participant observation in looking at English football supporter behaviour at matches overseas. Generally, the increased use of participant methods mirrors an increased use of the interactionist perspective within sociology. Participant observation, although time consuming, can be considerably cheaper and a potentially richer source of data than a survey approach; it may also 'get inside' the patterns of social behaviour in a way that other methods cannot.

Criticisms of observational studies

- The findings of such studies are, it is argued, impressionistic rather than precise, and the sociologist loses objectivity when identifying with the people being studied.
- There are ethical concerns involved with studying people 'unawares'. They might behave more naturally, but information about them is being gathered without their permission. Laurie Taylor was taken to task by police officers for condoning criminal activity when, as an observer, he accompanied criminals who were engaging in criminal acts.
- The presence of the sociologist can distort behaviour, and a member of a group can easily become influential. Ned Polsky, in his 1967 study *Hustlers, Beats and Others*, has pointed out that non-criticism of an action acts as a reinforcement to the individual who commits it.

Many of the answers are in the passage. Some are not! If you have difficulties, then make a note that you should return and revise.

1. What is the difference between overt and covert participation?
2. What more common term is used to describe covert observation.
3. With which perspectives is observation particularly associated?
4. Name two variant forms of that perspective.
5. When is observation particularly suitable as a tool of research?
6. Offer two examples of studies where observation has been used as a tool of research.
7. What practical problems can be associated with observation?
8. What practical benefits does observation bring to a research project?
9. What ethical problems may researcher practising observational technique experience?
10. To what does the term 'verstehen' refer?
11. What three sociological evaluations do Marcus and Ducklin offer of observational technique?
12. To what does the term triangulation refer in sociology?