Practical guide for conducting observations

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Practical guide for conducting observational data collection

Summary

This practical guide provides an overview of **conducting observations** to collect qualitative information **in the context of public policy design and evaluation of social programs**.. Remember that the success of these activities depends mainly on planning, the performance of the moderator, and the careful storage of the information obtained. This guide presents i) a definition of the technique and types of the collection, ii) the purpose for collecting information, iii) recommendations and steps to follow to apply the collection technique, and iv) applications of the technique in virtual contexts.

This document is the product of:

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2. The best practices for implementing qualitative collection techniques available in the **literature**.
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Observation

1. What are observations?

Observations are a qualitative research data collection technique that identifies **traits, behaviors, and interactions of individuals and their contexts** through the senses and interpretations of the researcher[1].

Normally, the observations' results are a detailed description of what the field researcher observed, heard, and interpreted during the execution of the research activities. Thus, observation is a subjective data collection technique that depends on observation, note-taking, and interpretation skills[2]. Depending on how the fieldwork is implemented, observations are distinguished between participant and non-participant.

Remember:

Given the nature of the observation technique, the information gathered can be in various formats such as text, video, audio, or images.

[1] For more information: Diaz, L. (2010). The Observation. Faculty of Psychology. National Autonomous University of Mexico.

[2] Ibid, p. 9.

1.1. Participant observation

In this type of observation, researchers can participate and interact in daily activities or the participants' specific contexts[3]. This allows a first-hand understanding of participants' daily practices, perspectives, and relationships. For example, a researcher implements journeys with community leaders to identify transport needs for accessing a social program.

1.2. Non-participant observation

In this type of observation, the researcher seeks to analyze the behavior and relationships of the participants without intervening (or intervening as little as possible) in the development of a given context or activity. In these cases, observers are located in a suitable place where they can listen and observe the interactions but do not make comments or participate during the activity's development. For example, a researcher does asynchronous remote observations through video records to identify how public school teachers reinforce gender stereotypes among students.

1.3. Unstructured observations vs. Structured observations

In participant and non-participant observations, the level of data structuring varies depending on the approach to the fieldwork and the expected result of the research activities, as follows:

1.3.1. Unstructured observations

Unstructured observations are characterized by **using open-ended questions in the data collection instruments to obtain highly descriptive and narrative information provided by the researcher**. An example of this is when researchers are doing fieldwork to map the challenges of caring for children. The researchers may attend a guided tour, accompanied by facilitators who share their experiences and describe opportunities for improving the infrastructure to better support the children's well-being. This kind of observation could be applied in any of the following contexts:

When could we use this approach?[4]

- "**Exploratory Research:** When the research topic is relatively unknown or when you want to explore a phenomenon without preconceived notions or rigid frameworks.
- **Complex or Dynamic Settings:** In environments where behaviors or interactions are complex and unpredictable, allowing the observer to capture a wide range of activities and interactions.
- **Contextual Understanding:** When the focus is on gaining a deep, holistic understanding of a setting, context, or culture without the constraints of predefined categories.

[3] For more information: Kawulich, B. (2005). Participant observation as a method of data collection. FQS: Forum Qualitative Social Research. Vol 6, No. 1, Art. 43-, Natasha Mack et al., "Module 2 Participant Observation" in Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide (2005), 29-50;

[4] Creswell, J. W. & Poth, C. N. (2018). Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches. SAGE Publications.

- **Flexibility Required:** When the researcher needs the flexibility to follow interesting leads or unexpected occurrences that emerge during the observation.
- **Deep Immersion:** When you need to deeply understand the culture, practices, and perspectives of a group by experiencing them firsthand.
- **Contextual Understanding:** When the behavior or social interactions of a group are better understood from an insider's perspective.
- **Hidden Behaviors:** When certain behaviors or interactions are not visible to outsiders, requiring the researcher to become part of the group.
- **Building Trust:** When establishing trust and rapport with participants is essential for obtaining accurate data, and this trust is best achieved through involvement.
- **Sensitive Topics:** When studying sensitive or private behaviors that participants may not openly share with an outsider".

1.3.2. Structured observations

Structured observations are characterized by **using closed-ended questions to obtain specific information to obtain short responses, counts, or responses on scales**. One example is when researchers conduct asynchronous observations of recordings to identify the frequency with which teachers in public educational institutions reinforce gender stereotypes among children under five years old during their classes. Beyond this example, structured observations can be applied in the following contexts:

When could we use this approach?[5]

- **"Focused Research:** When the research aims to collect specific, consistent, and comparable data across different settings or subjects.
- **Quantifiable Data Needed:** When the researcher needs to quantify behaviors or interactions, making it easier to analyze and compare results.
- **Predefined Variables:** When the study has clear research questions or hypotheses, and the researcher knows exactly what behaviors or events to observe and record.
- **Consistency Across Observers:** When multiple observers are involved, consistency in data collection is essential to ensure reliability
- **Objectivity**: When maintaining a level of detachment is important to avoid influencing the behavior of the participants.
- **Ethical Concerns**: When participation might raise ethical issues, such as in situations where the researcher's involvement could affect the outcome.
- **Natural Behavior:** When observing natural, unaltered behavior is critical, and the presence of a participant observer might alter how people act.
- **Large Groups:** When studying large groups or public behaviors where direct participation isn't feasible or necessary.
- **Comparative Studies:** When comparing behaviors across different groups or settings, a consistent, detached observational stance is required".

[5] Creswell, J. W. & Poth, C. N. (2018). Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches. SAGE Publications.

1.3.3. Structured or unstructured approach: Which is better?

Participatory observations are often aligned with an unstructured approach, as the richness of these activities typically relies on the events, topics, and places that emerge during the fieldwork. In contrast, structured observations are often aligned with a non-participant approach, given that it could allow the research teams to standardize observations, and minimize interference with the context.

The choice between structured, unstructured, or mixed approaches depends on the specific needs of the study and its research design. In practice, these approaches are not mutually exclusive, meaning that research teams could combine both lenses during the fieldwork.

2. How to prepare your team?

Preparing for an observation involves several key steps i) planning logistical aspects for the development of the observations, ii) structuring the team that will carry out the observation, iii) knowing the objectives of the research and becoming familiar with the observation instruments, and iv) taking into account recommendations for carrying out the observation.

2.1. Planning

The logistical elements and resources that you need to keep in mind when planning for an observation are the following:

- **Understand What You Will Observe:** The first step is to review the observation matrix or other relevant study materials, paying attention to the following aspects:
    - Objectives of the observation.
    - Type of observation to be conducted (e.g., unstructured participant).
    - Activities to be carried out.
    - People, places, and territories involved in the observation context.
    - Timing and extent of the fieldwork.

- **Contact Allies, Leaders, and Key Actors:** For participant observations, it is recommended to contact local people who will accompany the observations, provide context, and facilitate the activities. For non-participant observations, allies or leaders can assist with logistics and offer valuable recommendations to the research team.

- **Review Research Ethics and Safe Data Handling Protocols:** Two aspects must be taken into account when approaching an observation ethically.

    - Ensure that all necessary permissions have been obtained from communities and partners involved to conduct observations.

    - Obtain informed consent from participants, particularly when collecting audio, image, or video records.
- **Ensure You Have an Observation Guide and Note-Taking Format:** During the planning phase, you should make sure that:
    - You understand how the observation will be conducted.
    - You have adapted the note-taking strategy to the context of the observation (digital, paper).
    - You are clear on the expected outputs at the end of the field activities[6].

- **Verify the Location and Conditions of the Observation Site:** Since observations often take place in participants' everyday environments, it's essential to ensure that the site is comfortable and suitable for the observation.

2.2. Structure your team

The team members who develop the observations vary considerably according to the scope of the research and the resources available to achieve these objectives.

Observation teams should ideally consist of at least two members who conduct observations together. Having multiple observers broadens the perspectives on the observed contexts and enhances the collection of resources, such as audiovisual material.

However, if budget constraints limit the number of observers, this could potentially affect the quality of the activity and the data collected. Additional participants might be necessary, especially in sensitive or high-security contexts[7].

When structuring your team, consider how individual observer characteristics might influence data collection[8]. The team should reflect on which aspects might introduce bias or cause resistance from the population being studied. Understanding the context and the population is crucial for this exercise[9] .

2.3. Field Team Skills

The quality of the information produced during qualitative fieldwork is related to the skills of the moderator and facilitator leading the activity to collect the information[10] . According to

[6] According to the research design, this may be the completion of an observation matrix, the writing of a field diary or the development of a field note. For this same variation, fieldworkers should identify the expected result of the work.

[7] Diaz, L. (2010). The Observation. Faculty of Psychology. National Autonomous University of Mexico.

[8] For example, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, racial typology, and soft skills to perform the observation exercise.

[9] Kawulich, B. (2005). Participant observation as a method of data collection. FQS: Forum Qualitative Social Research. Vol 6, No. 1, Art. 43

[10] Marío Luis Small and Jessica Calarco, Qualitative Literacy. A guide to evaluating ethnography and interview research (Oakland, 2022).

Small and Calarco, it is possible to identify certain competencies[11] (described in Table 1), which allow the teams conducting qualitative data collection to recognize and adequately represent the diversity within the qualitative data.

The skills listed in Table 1 are typically developed and strengthened through years of study and practice in qualitative methodologies. However, field teams often consist of individuals from multidisciplinary backgrounds with varying levels of experience in monitoring and evaluating social programs. Whether your team is highly experienced or new to qualitative data collection techniques, you should review and discuss these skills with your team to identify possible gaps and opportunities for improvement.

Currently, there are no standardized metrics to measure the prevalence of these skills among qualitative fieldwork moderators. Therefore, the skills in Table 1 should be viewed as a resource for reference and reflection for teams.

It's essential to ensure that everyone on the team, regardless of their experience level, understands how these competencies contribute to effectively engaging with the population and reflects on their abilities to collect high-quality information.

Table 1: *Desirable skills in the field team*

Ability	Description	Why is this skill important?
Cognitive empathy	The field team's ability to understand and communicate participants' situations from their perspectives, understanding how they see the world and their roles within it.	● Allows researchers to connect more deeply with participant's realities and experiences. ● Helps to create a relationship of trust and respect with the participants. ● Seeks to avoid generalizations and stereotypes that may arise from preconceptions or external influences such as previous studies. ● Enhances understanding of participants' situations without resorting to pity.

[11] Ibid.

Follow-up	The field team's ability to recognize when additional information is needed to answer the questions initially posed and those that arise during the research process. This ability implies curiosity and a willingness to explore new issues or doubts that emerge as data collection progresses.	• Increases the quality and robustness of data by allowing a more detailed exploration of the studied phenomenon. • Contributes to obtaining deeper responses from participants. • Enables exploration of emerging themes during data collection. • Helps in detecting and validating patterns observed in the field.
Self-awareness and reflexivity	The field team's ability to continuously reflect on how their presence, background, and assumptions influence data collection, interpretation, and analysis. This ongoing self-reflection ensures that the qualitative field team is mindful of its impact on the research process and the participants.	• Helps maintain ethics in the researcher-participant relationship. • Facilitates understanding of personal limitations in connecting with participants. • Aids in developing strategies to overcome communication barriers and create an environment where participants feel comfortable sharing sensitive information.
Heterogeneity	The field team's ability to represent and reflect the diversity within the group being studied. This skill involves recognizing and documenting the differences and variations among individuals or subgroups during qualitative research, typically applied during	• Contributes to challenging generalized and simplistic patterns. • Ensures that data reflect both common and atypical experiences. • Demonstrates the field team's ability to identify,

	the data analysis phase.	recognize, and document heterogeneity in the population studied.
Palpability	The field team's ability to provide detailed descriptions in their field notes or diaries, making the data tangible and clear. This involves avoiding abstract descriptions and, instead, offering vivid accounts that allow the research team to visualize and understand participants' experiences and contexts. The palpable field notes and diaries are accompanied by textual quotations, images, or other audiovisual resources that show events, situations, and actors that support the research findings.	• Reliable findings are supported by specific details that clearly depict the events and situations studied. • Helps to avoid abstraction in the data, grounding conclusions in concrete evidence.

These skills may seem abstract and complex. In the following section are described specific tasks that you can implement during data collection that will help you cultivate the skills described above.

2.4. Study the observation guide

Remember:

For note-taking, you can use narrative resources, photographs, drawings, or examples to describe participants' interactions and reactions, as appropriate.

The resources designed for observation help guide the observer, with varying degrees of structure depending on the research design. Observation guides are characterized by:

1. **Alignment with Research Objectives:** The guide should directly relate to the goals of the research.
2. **Identification of Key Characteristics:** It should clearly identify the characteristics that need to be observed.
3. **Appropriate Scope:** The guide should contain a manageable number of statements for the characteristics being observed, ensuring it is comprehensive but not overwhelming[12].

[12] Diaz, L. (2010). The Observation. Faculty of Psychology. National Autonomous University of Mexico.

Familiarize yourself with the characteristics of the instruments and the type of information expected to be generated (e.g., field notes, diaries, or activity logs). If the observation is conducted in a group, it is advisable to study the instruments together and agree on the general criteria you wish to observe.

2.5. Be prepared to make observations

Participant observation	Non-participant observation
• Be genuinely interested in the participants and show respect and curiosity towards the realities you observe. • Avoid making assumptions; don't assume that the concepts or ideas expressed or observed are clear to everyone. • Aim to build an empathetic connection with participants, helping them feel safe and valued when sharing their emotions and experiences.	• Find a comfortable and quiet location for taking notes. • Ensure that your observation does not disrupt the spontaneity or daily flow of the events being studied. • Position yourself in a place that does not distract or attract the participants' attention. • Ensure that participants understand the purpose of the activity and feel comfortable with your presence. If they do not, consider postponing or canceling the observation..

Common Practices for Both Observation Types:

- Maintain a curious attitude towards the events being observed.
- Train your memory to accurately record information in your observation forms.
- Integrate good practices with the necessary skills for effective observation.

3. What to do during and after the observation?

3.1. During observation

1. **Introduction:** Begin by introducing yourself and clearly explaining each team member's role and the session's general dynamics. **Informed Consent:** If appropriate, read the informed consent, ensuring that all participants clearly understand the purpose of the activity and the potential risks and benefits of their involvement. Given the variety of formats collected (e.g., audio, video, images), informed consent must cover the full scope

of the activity. Beyond the formal process of informed consent, make sure that the people, group, or community being observed know about the study and its aims.

2. **Creating a Comfortable Environment:** Whether it's participant or non-participant observation, it's crucial to create a comfortable and calm atmosphere to avoid discomfort and encourage spontaneity.

Considerations
In prolonged observations it is desirable to supplement the notes of the research activities with field diaries.

3. **Attitude:** Show interest, friendliness, and respect for all contributions[13], and maintain a curious and open-minded attitude, even when discussions are lengthy or opinions differ from your own.

4. **Note-taking:** Take notes on your observations or make audiovisual records according to your study's requirements.

3.1.1. Possible challenges

Table 2: *Possible challenges for observations.*

Challenges	Description	Possible solutions
Distrust on the part of the participants	While the presence of observers inherently alters the participants' daily routine, it can also lead to increased distrust among some individuals.	• Provide a detailed introduction, clearly explaining the purpose of your visit and the activities involved. • Reassure participants that they are not being evaluated or judged. • Use electronic devices like a computer or cell phone to record key ideas, which may make participants feel less directly observed. • If the observation was planned as non-participant, consider engaging in the activities to create a more comfortable environment.
Difficulty in documenting all data	Balancing observation with participation can make it challenging to document all relevant information that arises during the activity.	• Prioritize information that is most relevant to your research. • Focus on the research objectives and follow the observation guide to maintain attention on key aspects. • Take quick notes during the observation, using keywords or key concepts to capture essential details.

[13] For more information on active listening techniques and practices, refer to the following recommended resources: *The LARA Method for Managing Tense Talks* and *Key Tips for Active Listening*.

Objectivity vs. subjectivity	Since observation is a subjective technique, it is crucial to differentiate between your interpretations and the descriptive elements of the environment.	● Write your diary or field note in three stages: ○ Describe the environment and the participants' interactions. ○ Detail your own participation in the space. ○ Record reflections and interpretations that emerge from the observation. ● Remember that it is essential to keep a distance from the observation activities. You should participate in the spaces while maintaining an objective view from a distance[14] .
Generating agreement on assigned values	Using quantitative scales in observations can be challenging, as it requires consensus on what each observer should record in each response box.	● Establish clear observation agreements or use standardized rating rubrics to ensure consistency across observers. ● Start with an unstructured observation to identify any biases or concerns, then proceed to a structured observation based on those insights. ● When assigning values on a scale, provide a rationale in additional comments to clarify why a particular category was selected.

3.2. After observation

The observation exercise concludes when you leave the participants' environment and return to a private space for reflection. Upon returning:

- **Review Notes:** Revisit your notes and elaborate on key observations.
- **Write Observation Notes:** Include descriptions of the environment, participant interactions, your participation, and any reflections or interpretations that arise.
- **Supplement Your Notes:** Add photographs, drawings, or maps as necessary.
- **Document Preliminary Findings:** In cases of extensive fieldwork, summarize preliminary findings in field diaries based on the various collection techniques used.

3.2.1. Possible errors to avoid during data closure

The quality of note-taking is critical to the success of the collection technique; errors to avoid are:

[14] Roller, M. (2022). Ethnography & the Observation Method. 15 articles on design, implementation, & uses.

- **Neglecting Note-Taking:** Avoid delaying note-taking; it should be done during or immediately after the research activity.
- **Inadequate Refinement:** Ensure that notes are refined and completed within 24 hours of the observation to capture accurate details and reflections.
- **Ethical Practices:** Always adhere to ethical practices in data closure, particularly in protecting research subjects.

4. What are the challenges in virtual observations?

Digitally mediated observations can be conducted in two primary ways:

1. **Video conferencing**: An observer connects remotely via a video conferencing platform, supported by an in-situ facilitator.
2. **Asynchronous Review**: Observers analyze recordings of activities at a later time.

Both methods involve non-participant observation with a significant physical distance from the context being studied. This distance can lead to a disconnect between the observer and the participants' reality, potentially limiting the depth of reflections and interpretations. Despite these limitations, virtual observations can provide valuable insights, particularly in evaluating specific aspects of social programs. For instance, quantitative data can be collected by observing recorded class sessions, contributing to assessments of program impact.

Virtual observations can also serve as an alternative when constraints arise in the following resources:

Table 3: *Resource constraints for making observations*

Economic	Temporary	Staff
Difficulty affording transportation for collection equipment.	Urgency in generating responses may preclude the time-intensive planning required for fieldwork.	Limited availability of personnel to ensure the proper functioning of equipment in the field.

4.1. Challenges and Solutions in Remote Observations:

Challenges	Description	Possible solutions
Volume of observations	Conducting around 500 observations posed significant logistical	• Use audiovisual recordings to capture information, which the designated team can then review.

	challenges, requiring large teams and extensive resources.	
Observer profile	If the project's focus on socio-emotional skills necessitates observers with specific professional expertise.	• Identify the appropriate observer profile, both professionally and personally. For example, psychologists with experience in emotional intelligence and observation were selected.
Observer out of context	Remote observations can detach observers from the context, particularly when others collect the data, leading to a lack of crucial contextual understanding.	• Develop critical questions for the collection team, focusing on specific aspects like site characteristics, time of observation, participant attitudes, and unrecorded comments to help the observer understand the context. • Promote dialogue between the collection team and the observers to bridge contextual gaps.
Multiple observers	Asynchronous observation on a large scale often involves multiple observers with varying personal and professional backgrounds, potentially influencing the observation outcomes.	• Create a structured observation guide that includes item descriptions and relevant examples to ensure consistency. For instance, provide examples of teacher actions related to emotional recognition, regulation, and validation. • Conduct group observation exercises to align and verify observation standards.

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