

# Methodological issues and qualitative research



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This piece of reflecting writing aims to illustrate what I have learnt about different qualitative research methods and their designs. “ Comparison between participant observation and interviewing as methods of data collection and deciding which method is better has been part of the discourse of qualitative methodologists for over four decades” (Atkinson et al. , 2003). I have to say my first choice was an interview but I decided that the observation will be more appropriate for my research question. I also thought an observation seemed easier than an interview and did not require a lot of preparation.

I imagined I could just go, sit and observe and the answer to my research question will just pop into my head. Before I chose this method I read a bit about its strengths and weaknesses and I was pretty confident that an observation is the best method to use. And I must say that things I found out doing my research about designing the observation and reading about all them researchers who used this method before were very interesting: Banister (1995) and his bus queuing observation, Albert and Kessler (1978) and their observation of people’s greeting rituals on the phone (this one was particularly interesting as I work in a call centre) and Patrick (1973) looking at Glasgow gangs (well..

. we have one of our call centrums based in Glasgow... ). There were two basic methods of observation I could choose from: participant and non-participant (direct observation).

Direct observation is one of wide variety of methods that are common in qualitative research. This technique is often called the “ non-intrusive”

observation. Direct observation is different than the participant observation. Both direct and participant observation consist an observation but choosing direct observation enabled me to collect my data without interacting with people I was observing. They could do what they normally do without being disturbed by me (the observer).

I knew that by deciding to do a direct observation I would not be able to experience the situation being studied but it was important that my participants did not know I was observing them. If I decided to join people I was observing (participant observation) I would have a problem with recording my thoughts and findings. There are lots of advantages of direct observation. First of all: validity.

That means that people are observed in their natural settings. Direct observation is also useful when the observed person can not provide information about the studied topic or is feared to provide this information. Sometimes people does not want to talk about particular things and experiences as they are scared, ashamed or they could not explain what and how they feel. Using this method you can observe things that may not be easily explained by the person using another method of research (e. g. interviewing) that makes it the only practical method, especially with crime, child abuse or domestic violence. Some people would feel uncomfortable if they were told they are being observed. They would not behave naturally. Instead, they would act and behave as they thought they should behave.

If you are using the covert observation - when people do not know you are observing them - this problem is eliminated and gives you confidence that

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people will behave naturally. According to Patticrew and his colleagues (2007) “ covert research and the use of covert methods have always been contentious, on the grounds that they may involve the deliberate misleading of the public or other study participants. However, they offer researchers access to information that is otherwise unavailable, and from a scientific perspective they offer the prospect of collecting objective data”. This is why the direct (covert) observation was the best method I could use in my research. The aim of my observation was to find out whether people behave differently in two different situations: when their manager is around and when their manager is absent.

I decided to observe my colleagues from work as I knew I will be able to observe them in 2 different situations described. I observed 2 people from my department. But not directly from my team as I thought I know my manager and team members very well and that may affect my data. I chose a male (37 years old) and a female (21 years old) both from the same team just to make sure that my participants' gender will not affect my findings. The manager was also a female Whilst considering ethics and ethical issues that may be raised in my research I did not think I will have any issues with ethics as in the area I wanted to observe people in is public.

In Human Research Ethics Handbook (2001) we can find that “ covert observation is usually regarded as acceptable if undertaken in a public place but it is implicit in sanctioning unconsented observation of individuals in a public place that they are aware that any of their actions will be visible to anyone simultaneously present. However, in the case of an individual who is incompetent, either temporarily as a result of alcohol or other drugs, or

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persistently as a result of disease, it cannot be inferred that they have considered the likelihood that others may observe them and, consequently, consent to such observation. The recording of some types of activity, including (but not limited to) illegal activity, may have harmful consequences for the individuals who are being observed. " Of course it does not include people I was observing but it is always important to remember about every possible situation. To ensure the anonymity of people I was observing I did not take any pictures or recorded any videos.

I did not record their names and did not use any private data that might identify them. The important part of designing my observation was deciding where the observation will take place, how I will observe my participants and how I will record my observations. I knew from the beginning that a perfect spot for my observation will be a smoking/break area outside my office. I am there every day and I know that you can spend hours looking at your colleagues and pondering why they behave completely different when they are outside and inside the office.

But before I could start my observation I had to choose my participants and find out what time are their breaks so I could schedule my breaks for the same time. My research began on Monday when I observed my male participant and the manager was not around. I was standing about 15 feet away so I could hear (mostly) what my participant was saying but at the same time he could not hear me as I was speaking very low whilst recording my thoughts. I used my mobile phone for recording as it has got a built-in voice recorder. The observation lasted around 7 minutes.

After the observation I went back to the office and listened to my recordings and make some notes once I was at home. I repeated the same process (observation) 3 more times - with my female participant with and without her manager and with a male participant when his manager was present. After I completed my notes I was a bit disappointed. I realized that even though I was confident my observation was perfectly design I could have changed some things to make it better. First of all I could not hear my participants very well and I think that it had a considerable effect on data I collected.

In the future I take part rather than just watching my participants. Also I found that the observation is very time consuming. It is not only the moment you observing people but it is the time you are waiting for a right moment to observe. At the beginning I wanted to observe my whole team as I thought the bigger sample the richer data but I soon realized that I was not able to do this just within a week. I do not think that my data would be enough to decide if people behave changes if their manager is and is not present.

I think the bigger sample and more time would be required to be able to at least make some suggestions on this topic. Overall I am happy I chose the observation as my research method. I have learnt a lot of thing about observation, designing an observation, myself (as observer) and... my colleagues.

I learnt that a main strength of the observation is that you can see how people you are observing actually behave rather than what they say they do. Observation is very useful as a starting point in research. But there are some

disadvantages as well: observation is difficult to replicate and does not provide any information about participant's feelings and thoughts.

Sometimes the observer see what they want to see and the most important thing: observation can be time consuming and require precise preparation.