Observations

Lesson 2.1.5 | AS research methodology

Core ideas

Observations collect data by watching and recording behaviour rather than asking participants to report it.

Naturalistic observations take place in ordinary settings, while controlled observations happen in arranged situations.

Overt observations are open to participants, while covert observations are hidden from them.

Participant observers join the group being studied; non-participant observers watch without joining in.

Behavioural categories help observers record behaviour consistently and reduce vague descriptions.

Inter-observer reliability improves when more than one observer records the same behaviour and their records agree.

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Key terms

Observation: A method where researchers watch and record behaviour.

Naturalistic observation: Observation in a real-world setting where behaviour normally occurs.

Controlled observation: Observation in a structured or arranged setting.

Overt observation: Observation where participants know they are being watched.

Covert observation: Observation where participants do not know they are being watched.

Participant observation: Observation where the researcher joins the group or activity.

Behavioural category: A clear behaviour label used when recording observations.

Inter-observer reliability: Agreement between observers recording the same behaviour.

Further detail and evidence

Structured observation uses predefined behavioural categories; unstructured observation records behaviour more openly. A category must describe observable behaviour clearly enough for different observers to apply it consistently.

Observation classifications can combine: an observation may be overt, non-participant, naturalistic and structured. Structured recording uses operationalised categories; unstructured recording keeps more open notes. The setting and the observer's participation are different dimensions.

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Applying the ideas

Define a queue-cutting objection as a spoken protest directed at the intruder, rather than a vague "negative reaction". Two observers independently code the same events, compare agreement and refine ambiguous categories. Video can allow rechecking, with appropriate consent and privacy protection.

Worked example: Choose one type of observation for studying playground helping behaviour, and justify the choice. A naturalistic observation would be suitable because helping behaviour could be watched in the playground setting where it normally happens. The researcher could use behavioural categories such as offering help, sharing equipment or calling an adult. This would give realistic data, although consent and privacy would need careful handling.

Worked example: Assess one way to improve reliability in an observational study. Inter-observer reliability can improve confidence in the data because two observers independently record the same behaviour and compare their records. If they agree often, the behavioural categories are probably clear and consistent. If they disagree, the categories or observer training may need to be improved.

Evaluation and connections

Observation measures visible behaviour rather than private motives. Overt observation can change behaviour; covert observation may reduce reactivity but compromises prior consent. Category overlap or missed events can reduce reliability. Agreement between observers does not establish that a category validly measures aggression, discomfort or another construct.