
Crim 321: Qualitative Research Methods

Study Questions for Hennink et al / Chapter 9

Observation

1. What are some of the research objectives for which observational research is suitable?
2. The text recommends that you begin the observational process in social settings by doing more in the way of what they call non-participant observation. Why? What does that accomplish?
3. What are some advantages and limitations of using observation as a stand-alone method, and what do you gain by combining it with a method like interviewing?
4. There are many different things we can observe. One the authors of your text discuss at length is "body language." What three elements do they distinguish between, and what might you learn from each of those three?
5. When we observe, we are typically focussing on some behaviour or aspect of behaviour, but your text also suggests that there is also lots to be gained by observing the place or social setting in which the behaviour occurs. Like what?
6. Your text suggests (on p.180) that "complete participation" is also known as "going native." Your professor will suggest they are incorrect in doing so. So, according to your professor, what does "going native" actually mean?
7. The text outlines different roles that you can occupy when observing that range from complete non-participation to complete participation; they concentrate on the two extremes although you should keep in mind that there are various mixtures in between as well. On p.183, for example, four different levels of participation are noted. How are they distinguished? And how might each be seen as a "stage" or "level" in the process of systematically observing some group or setting?
8. Your text notes that being a complete participant can be extremely demanding. One issue that comes up concerns the extent to which you actually participate in the activities of the group. This is an especially relevant issue in a discipline like criminology, where many of the people we try and understand engage in criminal behaviour. That said, the text offers no definitive answers. So where would you draw the line if, for example, you were observing gang activity, or were studying sex work(ers)?
9. What is the "Hawthorne effect"?
10. What are some of the advantages and limitations of approaching your observation as a non-participant?

11. Although much observation happens *in situ* (i.e., out in the field) with us actually present, the text also discusses using visual aids, such as placing recording devices (like video or still cameras) in the setting. In what sorts of situations might they be particularly useful? What advantages and limitations come with using them?
12. When video or photographic equipment is used, the text talks about the need to “normalize” the equipment. What does that involve and why would you do it?
13. Instead of placing cameras in a particular setting to record activity, some research has been done in which the participants in your research are given cameras and asked to go and record any activity that is meaningful to them. How are the images then used?
14. How can a “walk through” of a study community contribute to your research?
15. The text offers an interesting perspective when they point out that you are the instrument through which observation occurs. An implication of that is that there will be certain skills that need to be employed to keep your observations rigorous and valid. The text describes seven different skills on pp.190-1. What are they and how is each useful?
16. Gaining access to a desired research site can be a challenge. What are some of the reasons that are cited when researchers are denied access? What do these imply to you in terms of how you might address each of those concerns when approaching a site for permission?
17. How might your appearance facilitate or impede the building of rapport when you enter a community?
18. What does “pre-testing” or “pilot testing” involve and what do you gain by doing it?
19. Keeping field notes is an important part of observing. The text suggests a strategy that involves creating concentric circles of observation. What does that involve? What goes in each circle?
20. Why is it important to remain descriptive and avoid inference when observing and recording field notes? Can you give an example of a “right” and “wrong” observation?
21. What is a field diary? How might it be useful? And how is it different from field notes?
22. Table 9.1 on page 198 outlines some strengths and limitations of observation, which are important for you to know. But don’t forget about Table 3.1 back on p.41 that compares in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and observation, all of which are methods we are discussing in the post-midterm portion of the course.