

Hello and welcome! My goals for this presentation are to:

- 1) Provide a brief history of ethnography to set a context for observations in qualitative research
- 2) Discuss what observations are in qualitative research
- 3) Review the forms of observation research
- 4) Present the various roles researchers can have in observations

To Begin: Ethnography

Observations are a very common form of qualitative research. They offer the researcher an opportunity to observe participants in a “natural” environment. As Flick (2019) explains, “If you look at the history of qualitative research, you will find that methodological discussions about the role of observation as a sociological research method have been central to it” (p. 325). Because observation is a central form of data collection in ethnography, I’d like to do a very brief overview of this methodology.

**Ethnography is a form of research born out of the field of anthropology. The basic purpose of an ethnographic study is to understand the culture of something or someplace. Flick explains it, “consists of participation, observation, listening, asking questions, and collection of any kind of data that is instructive for the issue of research” (p. 336). Just like other forms of qualitative research, ethnography seeks to explore a phenomenon rather than explain it. Researchers aren’t seeking to test hypotheses or measure variables. Instead, they work with often unstructured data, primarily observation, in a specific case (or collection of small cases) to develop an understanding of the meaning of human action and the detail of culture.

**If we look into the historical development of this methodology we’re confronted with early anthropologists. For instance, ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) was an anthropologist who spent several years in the Trobriad Islands in Melanesia learning about the culture and customs of the people there. He published his findings in his 1922 work, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Malinowski is influential in the social sciences for his foundational work in fieldwork and participant observation.

**As a later researcher, Clifford Geertz (1906-2006) is one of the most well-known anthropologists. Geertz was an American anthropologist who sought to understand what objects meant to specific groups of people. What this means is that Geertz was interested in understanding the cultural significance of specific objects for specific cultures of people. His work was foundational in developing the qualitative research methodology of symbolic interactionism. There are many more researchers, such as Eric Wolf (1923-1999) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) who were influential in the development of our understanding of how to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in qualitative research today.

Purpose of Ethnographic Research

James Spradley (1980) explained the purpose of ethnographic research saying, “I have suggested that ethnography is usually done with a single general problem in mind: to discover the cultural knowledge people are using to organize their behavior and interpret their experience. Such a

general goal encourages the ethnographer to study whatever informants feel is important in a particular cultural scene” (pp. 30-31). This means that one attempts to understand human behavior within a specific setting during ethnographic research. In ethnography, these are typically aspects of human behavior as related to culture.

**Spradley (1979) explains that culture is comprised of “three fundamental aspects of human experience: what people do, what people know, and the things people make use of. When each of these are learned and shared by members of some group, we speak of them as *cultural behavior*, *cultural knowledge*, and *cultural artifacts*” (p. 5). Ethnographic fieldwork attempts to distinguish these from one another through observation. In fieldwork, you, as the researcher and observer, will be making inferences about what people do, what people say, and what objects people use. So, the goal of ethnographic fieldwork is to understand a society or culture, whether this be the culture of a classroom, the culture of a restaurant, the culture of the sidewalk, or the culture of a group of people. Your goal as a researcher is to understand human behavior within that cultural setting in an ethical and unbiased manner.

What is Observation as a Method?

Much of what ethnographers seek to learn is most readily accessible through the method of observation. Because of this, observation is commonly equated with ethnography. However, it is a method that is used in other qualitative (and some quantitative) research designs. If you have a research question that can be answered through describing the behaviors of individuals in a natural setting based on a researcher’s external observation of that setting, it’s likely that observation is a method that could work for your study. As Flick (2019) explains, “observations go into the field and the processes to be studied rather than relying on participants’ reports about what is studied” (p. 329).

**Observations allow researchers to actually see how participants behave, ideally naturally, within the culture or phenomenon that is the focus of the study. The argument is that this method allows the researcher to see how something actually works in practice in a natural environment.

**Generally, researchers rely on all their senses in observations. They will pay attention to what they see, hear, feel, smell, and sometimes taste (depending on the topic). Collecting details from each of the 5 senses allows researchers to generate data that is as robust as possible about the setting that is the focus of the observation.

**Researchers can have various roles in observations that determine their level of participation in the setting which they are observing. There are 2 categories of observation. The first is non-participant observation in which a researcher does not participate in the observed setting or event in any way. The second is participant observation, during which the researcher takes on a range of roles that enable them to observe as a member of the setting while recognizing that their presence and/or activities influence what is observed in the setting. In participant observation, the researcher gets much more of an internal perspective because they’re able to engage and have conversations with other members of the observed context.

**Flick (2019, p. 327) compiled the following list of the phases of observation research from several authors who are well known for their work on observations. There are 7 phases:

- 1) Select a setting to observe;
- 2) Define what is to be documented for each and every observation conducted;
- 3) Train observers to conduct observations (this really comes into play when working with a research team);
- 4) Conduct descriptive observations where a researcher will generally present the setting in fieldnotes;
- 5) Conduct focused observations where a researcher focuses on specific aspects of the setting that relate to the research question;
- 6) Conduct selective observations where a researcher will work to understand the primary concepts of the setting; and
- 7) End the observations when a researcher notices that additional observations will not produce new knowledge or insight.

Phases of Participant Observation

In the second category of observations, participant observation has various phases as well. According to Spradley (1980), these phases are:

- 1) To conduct descriptive observations in which a researcher records a general description of the observed research setting. The intent of these is type of observation is to orient themselves to the research context. These observations are conducted toward the beginning of a study during which time the researcher is still becoming a participant within the setting and known to the participants;
- 2) To conduct focused observations during which a researcher focuses in on specific aspects of the research question(s); and
- 3) To conduct selective observations. This type of observation typically occurs toward the end of a study. During these observations, a researcher is focused on finding “evidence and examples” of the specific processes and aspects of the observed setting that answer the research question(s) (Flick, 2019, p. 330).

Researcher Roles in Observations

So, the roles a researcher can have in an observation range from high to low involvement in the research setting. Various scholars will label them differently. For instance, Gold (1958) discusses the roles of complete participant, participant-as-observer, observer-as-participant, and complete observer. Spradley, another seminal researcher on the topic of ethnography and observation research uses the following labels:

- **Complete participation (when researchers observe a setting in which they are already full participants);
- **Active participation (when the researcher attempts to do what other people are doing in the research setting, but are not typically members of the setting);
- **Moderate participation (when the researcher attempts to have a balance between observation and participation);
- **Passive participation (when the researcher is present at the scene but does not participate or interact with others to any great extent); and

- **Non-participation (when the researcher has no interaction with the individuals they're observing).

Which style of observation is conducted often depends on the setting being observed. For instance, if a researcher wanted to observe the “culture” of how people pass each other on the sidewalk, and yes there has been research done on this topic, a researcher would likely choose non-participant role. On the other side of the spectrum, if a researcher was a teacher in a classroom who was interested in learning more about how students were behaving within a specific pedagogical activity, they may choose a complete participant or active participant role.

**Observations can also be structured or unstructured. Structured observations are when the researcher enters the field looking for very specific things within the setting. They may go in with a check-list or other form to use when looking for these specifics. Unstructured observations occur when the researcher does not use any such material to guide their data collection and attempt to understand everything about the setting as is possible during their observation.

References

Observation as a method has its strengths and limitations. I hope in this presentation you were able to gather a brief understanding of the method and its connections with the methodology of ethnography. Consider your research questions, its possible observation is a good method for you.

Flick, U. (2019). *An introduction to qualitative methods* (6th ed.). SAGE.

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