**OBSERVATION METHOD IN RESEARCH**

**Degree Course (Three Years)**

**Psychology Honours**

**B. A. Part– I Honours Paper I: General Psychology**

**By**

**Dr. Ranjan Kumar**
Ph.D., M. Phil (M & SP), PGDGC
Assistant Professor of Psychology
ranjan.counsellor@gmail.com

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**Meaning and definition**

The term observation derives from Latin, meaning to watch, to attend to, Dictionary definitions (e.g. Oxford English Dictionary, 1989) tend to stress that it is concerned with the accurate watching and noting of phenomena as they occur in nature, with regard to cause and effect or mutual relations (note: the definition carries `in nature' as opposed to manipulated experimental settings). Reber (1985), however, extends the definition that "All psychological methods involve observation, but stresses a distinction that should be made between research that is controlled by the manipulation of independent variables and research that is carried out by the use of naturalistic observation".

C.A. Moser (1958) expressed that "Observation can fairly be called the classic method of scientific study." Observation is one of the oldest and the most fundamental research method approaches. From the above definitions, it can be seen that `observation' is the process of collecting impressions of the world using all of one's senses, especially visual and auditory, which can be used as an independent `classic method' of scientific study and also as a part of research, supplementing other methods in an important way. However, in the layman's perception, understanding and usage of the term `observation' is very different from the one used in the social research processes. Everyone is an observer. However, observation stops being a part of everyday lives and becomes a research method if it is systematically planned, recorded and the recordings are checked for their validity and reliability with a particular intention for such an endeavour. These factors simply distinguish between simply observing the world around you and collecting research data through observation. Observation as a research method, thus, take place when the researcher intentionally, with a specific purpose in mind, place themselves amidst certain people, locations, situations and contexts to observe a phenomenon.

**Characteristics of Observation research**

The `characteristics' of observation technique, in general and as a method used in the qualitative realm of research are presented as follows:

**An intent and purpose:** Observation, as a scientific study seems to provide the characteristics of objectivity, precision, specificity, systematic steps, verifiable, reliable and valid. For insuring all of the above, the first and most important consideration is that the researcher (observer) must know clearly what is to be observed. A scientific observation always has an intent or a purpose behind it for it to be different from the everyday observation. Thus, for example: If a researcher wants to study a problem through observation such as "Does democratic style of teaching lead to better grades in school?" Here it is very important to measure "democratic style of teaching" by defining it in a way it can be subjected

to empirical testing, Only when the researcher operationalizes the constructs or variables he wishes to measure, the scope of `what to measure?' and the purpose of observation would become clear.

**Naturalism and qualitative research:** In a quantitative paradigm, when observation is used, it is comparatively more systematic following certain steps providing for planning, recording data and analyzing it, while being systematic is an important feature of research. Qualitative observational research attempts to capture life as experienced by the research participants, in the field as it happens, rather than through categories that have been predetermined by the researcher. Observational research assumes behavior is purposeful, reflecting deeper values and beliefs. Although it can be conducted in `contrived settings'; a characteristic of observational research is that it occurs in the natural settings to capture behavior as it occurs in the real life of the participant.

**Characteristic of contact:** Another characteristic is that it usually involves direct contact between the observer and participant though indirect observations by observing video and audio tapings can also be made.

**Exploratory research paradigm:** Observational research holds the `characteristic' to be `exploratory' in nature. It seeks to uncover unexpected phenomena, ideas, causes for behaviour and the like. As said, sometimes, though the researcher has planned his observation, the field might surprise him.

**Inductive reasoning, Idiography, Constructivism and Reflexivity:** Qualitative observational research uses inductive reasoning with concepts being induced from the observed behavior itself and uses an idiographic rather a nomothetic casual explanation.

**Characteristics of observation**

- Scientific observation is systematic
- Observation is specific
- Scientific observation is objective
- Observation is recorded immediately
- Observation is expert  Observation is verifiable
- It is both a physical and a mental activity. The observation eye 'catches' many things which are sighted, but attention is focussed on data that are pertinent to the given study.
- Observation is selective. A researcher does not observe anything and everything, but select the range of things to be observed on the basis of the nature, scope and objectives of his study.
- Observation is purposive and not casual. It is made for the specific purpose of nothing things relevant to the study.  It captures the natural social context in which persons' behavior occurs.

**Types of observation**

- Participant Observation
- Non-participant Observation
- Direct Observation
- Indirect Observation
- Controlled Observation
- Uncontrolled Observation

**Participant Observation :** In this observation, the observer is a part of the phenomenon or group which observed and he acts as both an observer and a participant. Example, a study of tribal customs by an anthropologist by taking part in tribal activities like folk dance. The person who are observed should not be aware of the researcher's purpose. Then only their behaviour will be 'natural.'

**Non - Participant Observation :** in this method, the observer stands apart and does not participate in the phenomenon observed. Naturally, there is no emotional involvement on the part of the observer. This method calls for skill in recording observations in an unnoticed manner. Example : use of recording devices to examine the details of how people talk and behave together.

**Direct Observation**: This means observation of an event personally by the observer when it takes place. This method is flexible and allows the observer to see and record subtle aspects of events and behavior as they occur. He is also free to shift places, change the focus of the observation. Example: Observer is physically present to monitor Indirect Observation : This does not involve the physical presence of the observer, and the recording is done by mechanical, photographic or electronic devices. Example : Recording customer and employee movements by a special motion picture camera mounted in a department of large store.

**Controlled Observation :** Controlled observation is carried out either in the laboratory or in the field. It is typified by clear and explicit decisions on what, how, and when to observe. It is primarily used for inferring causality, and testing casual hypothesis. Uncontrolled Observation : This does not involve over extrinsic and intrinsic variables. It is primarily used for descriptive research. Participant observation is a typical uncontrolled one.

**Planning observation** The use of observation method require proper planning. The researcher should carefully examine the relevance of observation method to the data need of selected study. He must identify the specific investigative questions which call for use of observation method. These determine the data to be collected. He must decide the observation content, viz., specific conditions, events and activities that have to be observed for the required data. For each variable chosen, the operational definition should be specified. The observation setting, the subjects to be observed, the timing and mode of observation, recording procedure, recording instruments to be used, and other details of the task should be determined. Observation should be selected and trained. The persons to be selected must have sufficient concentration powers, strong memory power and unobtrusive nature. Selected persons should be imparted both theoretical and practical training.

**Advantages of observation method**

- Reliable and objective
- Natural setting
- Useful for young and shy children
- No need of equipment or tool
- Useful for individuals as well as groups
- Immediate detection of problems
- Most direct measure of behavior
- Provides direct information
- Easy to complete, saves time
- can be used in natural or experimental settings

**Disadvantages of observation method**

- Subjectivity

- Less accuracy
- Interference
- Objective recording
- Lack of competency
- Unnatural situation
- Expensive
- Slow and laborious
- Biased  Lack of cooperation from peoples
- Favoritism

**Disadvantages of observation method**

- May require training
- Observer's presence may create artificial situation  Potential to overlook meaningful aspects
- Difficult to analyze
- In some cases, the use of observational methods may be unethical, as in observing people without their knowledge or consent.

**Observation tools and recording devices**

- Observation guides
- Recording sheets or checklist
- Schedule
- Field observation log
- Mechanical devices

**Observation guides :** These are printed forms that provide space for recording observations. They are particularly useful when several observers are involved or when you wish to obtain comparable information from several sites/ observation points or observations of many people. The more structured the guide, the easier it will be to tally the results. Recording sheets or checklist : These forms are used to record observations as in YES/NO option (present – not present) or on a rating scale to indicate extent or quality of something. Checklists are used when there are specific, observable items, actions or attributes to be observed.

**Schedule :** The data requirements are identified by analyzing the core of the problem, the objectives of the study, the investigative questions, hypothesis and the operational definition of concepts and out of the data requirements, items of data to be collected through observation are identified. A schedule is then constructed, covering those items of data. Field observation log : This may take the form of a diary or cards. Each item of observation is recorded under appropriate subheading. At the time of observation , rough noting may be made, and at the end of the day, fully log may be made. The card system is flexible and facilitates arrangement and re-arrangement of items in any desired order.

**Mechanical devices :** These may include cameras, tape recorders, videotape and electronic devices. Still, motion , sound, colour and time lapse cameras give a permanent record of events. Microscopic and telescopic lens may be used in cameras. Eye cameras are common in advertising and package research. The camera makes a record that can be analyzed later and may be used to illustrate your evaluation report.

**Conclusion** Under the observation method, the information is sought by way of investigator's own direct observation without asking from the respondent. For instance, in a study relating to consumer

behavior, the investigator instead of asking the brand of wrist watch used by the respondent, may himself look at the watch. The main advantage of this method is that subjective bias is eliminated, as such is relatively less demanding of active cooperation on the part of respondents as happens to be the case in the interview or the questionnaire method. This method is particularly suitable in studies (i.e. respondents) who are not capable of giving verbal reports of their feelings for one reason or the other.