Research Methods for Business Students

Chapter 8

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Learning points

- To understand the role that observation may play as a data collection method in your research design.
- To identify two types of observation, participant observation and structured observation, and their differing origins and applications.
- To adopt particular approaches to data collection and analysis for both participant observation and structured observation.
- To identify threats to validity and reliability faced by the two types of observation.
8.1 Introduction

- Observation involves: the systematic observation, recording, description, analysis and interpretation of people’s behaviour.
- *Participant observation* is qualitative and derives from the work of social anthropology earlier in the 20th century. Its emphasis is on discovering the meanings that people attach to their actions.
- *Structured observation* is quantitative and is more concerned with the frequency of those actions.
8.2 Participant observation: an introduction

- What is participant observation?
  - The researcher attempts to participate fully in the lives and activities of subjects and thus becomes a member of their group, organization or community. This enables the researcher to share their experiences by not merely observing what is happening but also feeling it.
  - It has been used extensively in these disciplines to attempt to get to the root of “what is going on” in a wide range of social settings.
8.2 Participant observation: an introduction

- Situations in which participant observation has been used.
  - Adopting the participant observer role as an existing member of an organization does present opportunities to you. However, it also has its dangers.
8.3 Participant observation: researcher roles

- Complete participant
- Complete observer
- Observer as participant
- Participant as observer

- See figure 8.1 in page 224
8.3 Participant observation: researcher roles

- **Complete participant**
  - The complete participant role sees you as the researcher attempting to become a member of the group in which you are performing research. You do not reveal your true purpose to the group members. You may be able to justify this role on pure research grounds in the light of your research questions and objective.
8.3 Participant observation: researcher roles

- Complete observer
  - You would not reveal the purpose of your activity to those you were observing. However, unlike the complete participant role, you do not take part in the activities of the group.
8.3 Participant observation: researcher roles

- Observer as participant

  You might adopt the role of observer as participant in an outward-bound course to assist team building if you were attending to observe without taking part in the activities in the same way as the “real” candidates. In other words, you would be a “spectator”. However, your identity as a researcher would be clear to all concerned. They would know your purpose.
8.3 Participant observation: researcher roles

- **Participant as observer**
  - In the role of participant as observer you reveal your purpose as a researcher. Both you and the subjects are aware of the fact that it is a field work relationship. You are particularly interested to gain the trust of the group.
8.3 Participant observation: researcher roles

- Factors that will determine the choice of participant observer role
  - The purpose of your research
  - The time you have to devote to your research
  - The degree to which you felt suited to participant observation
  - Organizational access
  - Ethical considerations
8.4 Participant observation: data collection and analysis

- Primary observations are those where you would note what happened or what was said at the time.
- Secondary observations are statements by observers of what happened or was said. This is necessarily involves those observer’s interpretation.
- Experiential data are those data on your perceptions and feelings as you experience the process you are researching.
8.4 Participant observation: data collection and analysis

- **Data collection**
  - The data that you collect depend on your research question and objectives which have given a particular focus to your observation.
  - How you record your data will depend to a great extent on the role you play as the participant observer.
8.4 Participant observation: data collection and analysis

- Data analysis
  - In participant observation research your data collection and analysis activity may be part of the same process. You will be carrying out analysis and collection of data simultaneously.
8.4 Participant observation: data collection and analysis

- Threats to reliability and validity
  - The greatest threat to the reliability of your research conclusions produces as a result of a participant observation study is that of observer bias.
8.4 Participant observation: data collection and analysis

- Advantages of participant observation
  - It is good at explaining “what is going on” in particular social situations.
  - It heightens the researcher’s awareness of significant social processes.
  - It is particularly useful for researchers working within their own organizations.
  - Some participant observation affords the opportunity for the researcher to experience “for real” the emotions of those who are being researched.
  - Virtually all data collected are useful.
8.4 Participant observation: data collection and analysis

- Disadvantages of participant observation
  - It can be very time consuming.
  - It can pose difficult ethical dilemmas for the researcher.
  - There can be high levels of role conflict for the researcher.
  - The closeness of the researcher to the situation being observed can lead to significant observer bias.
  - The participant observer role is a very demanding one, to which not all researchers will be suited.
  - Access to organizations may be difficult.
  - Data recording is often very difficult for the researcher.
8.5 Structured observation: an introduction

- Structured observation is systematic and has a high level of predetermined structure. If you use this method in your data collection strategy you will be adopting a more detached stance.
- Structured observation may form only a part of your data collection approach because its faction is to tell you how often things happen rather than why they happen.
8.5 Structured observation: an introduction

- Situations in which structured observation may be used
  - Time-and-motion study expert
8.5 Structured observation: an introduction

- Advantages of structured observation
  - It can be used by anyone after suitable training in the use of the measuring instrument.
  - It should yield highly reliable results by virtue of its replicability.
  - Structured observation is capable of more than simply observing the frequency of events.
  - The method allows the collection of data at the time they occur in their natural setting.
  - Structured observation secures information that most participant would ignore because to them it was too mundane or irrelevant.
8.5 Structured observation: an introduction

- Disadvantages of structured observation
  - The observer must be in the research setting when the phenomena under study are taking place.
  - Research results are limited to overt action or surface indicators from which the observer must make inferences.
  - Data are slow and expensive to collect.
8.6 Structured observation: data collection and analysis

- Using coding schedules to collect data
  - Checklist of questions to ask when choosing an “off-the-shelf” coding schedule
    - see box 8.1 in page 234
  - You may decide that no “off-the-shelf” coding schedule is suitable for your purposes.
  - An alternative to the use of an “off-the-shelf” coding schedule or the development of your own may be a combination of the two.
8.6 Structured observation: data collection and analysis

- Data analysis
  - It may be that the amount of interactions varies by the nature of the group or its activity, or that seating position is associated with the amount of contributions.
  - Patterns reflecting relationships between amounts of interaction categories may become evident, and this level of analysis is obviously more complex and will need computer software to calculate the cross-classifications.
8.6 Structured observation: data collection and analysis

- Threats to validity and reliability
  - Subject error
  - Time error
  - Observer effect
8.7 Summary

- Participant observation is a method in which the researcher participates in the lives and activities of those whom they are studying. It is used to attempt to get to the root of “what is going on” in a wide range of social settings.
- You may use the participant observation method in a student placement or you may already be a member of an organization that will enable you to adopt the role of the practitioner-researcher.
8.7 Summary

- Participant observation means that you adopt a number of potential roles differentiated by the degree to which your identity is concealed from the subjects of the research and the degree to which you participate in the events you are studying.
- Participant observation must avoid the trap of mere storytelling. The purpose is to develop theory.
8.7 Summary

- A prevalent form of data analysis used in participant observation is analytic induction. This may lead to an initial hypothesis being redeveloped more than once.
- Structured observation is concerned with the frequency of events. It is characterized by a high level of predetermined structure and quantitative analysis.
8.7 Summary

- A choice may be made between “off-the-shelf” coding schedules and a schedule that you design for your own purpose. Alternatively you may decide to use a “hybrid”.
- The main threats to reliability and validity inherent in structured observation are subject error, time error and observer effects.
The End

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THANK YOU!

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