IES Institute of Education Sciences

Guidelines for Observations

When to Use Observations

You might conduct observations in the following situations:

- To collect information about processes or situations.
- To study interactions and behaviors in a naturalistic setting.
- To describe a physical environment.
- To record characteristics of individuals or groups.
- To confirm or challenge perceptions gathered from other data collection methods.
- When other data collection procedures are not feasible.

Steps in Conducting Observations

Step 1: Identifying evaluation questions to be answered through observations

Step 2: Identifying items to observe

For example, you might observe the following:

- Interactions: Level of participation, interest, power relationships, decisionmaking, general climate, levels of support, and cooperation.
- Nonverbal behavior: Facial expressions, gestures, and postures.
- Evidence of implementation: Participation in program or intervention, achievement of goals, and completion of activities.
- Actions of program presenters: Clarity of communication, group leadership skills, awareness of group climate, flexibility, and knowledge.
- Physical surroundings: Rooms, amenities, and seating arrangements.
- Products of a program: Project demonstrations, plans, brochures, and manuals.

Step 3: Choosing an approach for collecting data

You might use the following approaches to collect your observation data:

- Recording checklists: Standardized forms, with preset questions and responses, for observing specific behaviors or attributes.
- Observation guides: Forms that list behaviors or processes to observe, with space to record open-ended data.
- Open field notes: Narrative records of what observers hear or see. Field notes are a flexible way to document observations.

Step 4: Choosing controlled or natural observations

The observation format depends on your evaluation needs as well as the target population.

- Controlled observations are conducted in structured and arranged settings. They are usually overt (observers make their presence known).
- Natural observations are conducted in unstructured and real-life settings. They can be overt or covert (observers do not make their presence known).
    - Participant observations are the most common type of natural observation. In this case, observers either overtly or covertly immerse themselves in the environment of those being observed.
    - Participants may change their behavior in the presence of observers. *Ecological validity* refers to the extent to which the results of a study are generalizable to real-life settings. If ecological validity is important (for example, when examining bullying), consider conducting covert observations.
    - Always consider ethical issues (for example, deception, privacy) and consent procedures when conducting overt or covert observations.

Step 5: Determining the timing

The next step is to determine when and how frequently you will conduct observations. Taking action or making a decision after only a single observation can be misguided, so consider the number of observations needed. Also determine how long your observations will be. Observations should be long enough to capture the beginning, middle, and end of what you are interested in observing. Participants' behaviors may change during the entire time frame. Also consider whether the time of day, week, season, or year will influence your findings.

Step 6: Selecting observation sites

It is important to select enough observation sites so that the data are representative of the target population.

Step 7: Developing an observation protocol

An observation protocol should include the following information from steps 1 through 6:

- The evaluation question(s).
- The items to observe.
- The data collection approach (recording sheet or checklist, observation guide, or open field notes).
- The type of observation (controlled or natural, overt or covert).
- Directions related to the approximate timing of observations and the use of the data collection form.
- Information about the observation sites.

Step 8: Identifying and training observers

- Potential observers include stakeholders, other professionals, program participants, graduate students, and interns. Consider whether you need one or more observers.
- Train all observers on the observation protocol to ensure that they understand the protocol and can apply it consistently across observations.
- Include practice observations in the training so that observers can use the protocol and compare notes to ensure calibration.
- If the observation protocol includes a rating scale, make sure that observers clearly understand each level of the scale.

Step 9: Conducting observations

Consider audio- or video-recording observations, if possible. If recording is not possible, taking good notes is important. It may also be a good idea to have multiple observers present at an observation so that they can discuss and reach consensus about any uncertainties that arise.

Note. Adapted from the following sources:

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