

# OBSERVATION METHOD

## Unit 4 (2)

- The different methods of inquiry aim to answer meaningful questions related to the problem under investigation.
- Methods of inquiry used in social science are experimental, questionnaire interview, case study, content analysis and observation.
- Each of these methods are suited to the study of problems and population of different nature.
- Among all the methods, observation method is the oldest method which have been used as a technique of investigation both in the natural and social scientists.
- In this method one collects the information by directly or indirectly watching and recording the events as they go on.
- The term observation sounds to be very simple. From this one may derive that it is an easy and simple method of data collection.
- Observation of day to day life is very simple and do not need any specialization on the part of the applier. However, it does not remain to be so simple when used as a technique of scientific investigation.
- Though observation is one of the most widely applied methods, yet it has been subject to maximum of criticism. It has often been criticized as being the most subjective, idiosyncratic and unreliable method.
- To over come its limitations scientists have been trying their best to make it scientific.
- Observation method is mainly suited to the study of culture, institutional process and human behaviour.
- It cannot be used to gain information about a person's perception, belief, feelings, emotions, motivations, anticipations, future plans, etc.

### **Meaning: Scientific and Non-Scientific Observation**

- In our day to day life we are constantly observing and noticing the events going around us. Often such observation may lead to some decision.
- For example, while walking on the street we notice people and vehicle moving towards different directions.
- On the basis of such observations we may make a decision of crossing or not crossing the street. According to such decision, we may act also.
- We also make observation, while driving we have to see whether there is a green signal or not, besides this we have to watch the street conditions, other moving vehicles, persons moving on foot, on cycles etc and drive accordingly so that no body jumps before the vehicle all of a sudden and creates accidents.
- However, such observations cannot be called as scientific observation because they are not essentially related to a set of systematic questions. Here we are observing several events simultaneously but not categorically. Also we do not aim to make general conclusion in relation to the factors determining accidents or the driver's behaviour. Here

we are simply interested to make decision of crossing the street or further driving the vehicle.

- Scientific observation, on the other hand, has to be systematic, planned and categorical in providing description, in establishing relationship among events, in locating the causes behind them and thus in testing of the hypothesis.

### **Essential Characteristics of Scientific Observation It Must Serve a Formulated Research Purpose**

- Observation may serve a variety of research purposes. It may be used in exploratory research to gain insights into the problems which can later be tested by other techniques of data collection. It may be used to gather supplementary data to interpret the previous findings.
- It may be used as primary method to obtain description of a given phenomena or to provide explanation of specific problem.
- Similarly like other methods, observation method can also be used to verify and extend the generalizations or theories formed on the basis of other studies.

### **Observation must be Planned Systematically**

- Planning systematically means to spell out the steps.
- It consists of planning the area of observation deciding the process of observation, selecting the settings where observations is to be made and deciding the type or structure of the observation to be followed.
- For any observation setting is the most important factor that determines the success of observation as both the observation and recording are simultaneously done with the occurrence of the events.
- Settings are places where the people from different stratum of the society, namely from different religious, racial or other groups live together or are involved in action and interaction or in which the events take place.'
- After the selection of settings we decide about specific types of behaviors, interactions or inter-relations that have to be observed.
- Observer selects from numerous events going around himself those which are of his interest.
- He then plans their systematic observation and categorical recording.

### **Types of Observation Methods:**

- On the basis of structure and process, the observation method can be divided as;
  - (a) Systematic, Structured and Controlled Observation Method.
  - (b) Unstructured and Uncontrolled Observation Method: This can further be divided on the basis of degree of participation by observers in activities of groups being observed.
    - (a) non participant observation
    - (b) participant
    - (c) quasi participant

### **Systematic, Structured And Controlled Observation Method:**

- This method, mostly called as structured observation method, is one in which the observer knows in advance as to what aspect of behaviour or activities of the people are relevant for his research work and, therefore, he plans the manner of observing and recording of the events much before the actual data collection begins.
- Which implies that in it, the things to be observed, the steps of observation, the conditions under which the observation is to be made, the manner of recording and the items under which the observations are to be recorded, etc are prefixed.
- All this makes the observation highly structured and systematized.
- Structured observation method is used when the researcher is well acquainted with the problem under investigation and also the population which is to be studied.
- Therefore, one can frame and also test more precise concepts and hypothesis in it.
- In the structured observation method one makes use of more carefully drawn schedules and questionnaire. He may even use the audio-visual aids, scales, map tables and diagrams etc. There help in categorical observing and recording of facts, in comparing the current studies with previous ones and also verifying and correcting the previous measurements through repeated studies.
- Being a standardized method, the structured observation can be easily repeated and the limitation of the study can be easily assessed.
- In structured observation method it can be easily possible to achieve structured, precise, reliable and valid data as it is easy to eliminate or avoid inclusion of observer's bias and has selective perception of the events.
- The degree of validity in an observation method depends upon the degree of its structuredness, the condition under which it is carried on and also the efficiency of the observer.
- Structured observation is carried on either in the field situation under a natural condition or in the laboratory setting under artificial but controlled conditions. However, whenever, possible observation should be done under natural conditions because, that presents a more accurate and true picture of the events before the observer.
- For achieving reliable and valid data through this method, the most important step would be to develop most standardized techniques for observing and recording the events.
- In structured observation method accuracy is achieved by using precise and exact measuring instruments, which measure the variables.
- Here also use of two or more observers like that in non-structured observation becomes most useful to maintain validity and reliability.

### **Simple, Unstructured, Uncontrolled Observation:**

- The observation method is said to be simple and unstructured when things to be observed are not prefixed.
- The observer is more or less in a free situation.

- He has to decide in the field, at the spot of observation, about the things to be observed. This gives him the opportunity of decision making.
- Opportunities of decision making makes the role of observer more significant.
- Hence the success of investigation depends upon the quality of the observer i.e. his capability of understanding the situation and observing.
- This capacity or capability, he develops through training and experience.
- On this basis it can be said that the observers are not born but made.
- It is considered as uncontrolled method because there is no restriction over the observer as to what to observe, how to observe, how to record, and so on.
- Also there is no control over the observer. The observers are allowed to act or behave according to their own wishes.
- Most of our knowledge about social relationship is derived from such uncontrolled observation. However, the greater problem in case of this type of observation is that due to lack of control over the observer there are chances of mixing reporting of observation with interpretation of the observed facts or events.
- Simple, unstructured and uncontrolled observation may further be divided into three sub types, on the basis of degree of participation by the observer and on the basis of the nature of relationship between observer and observed.
  - (a) Non-participant observation method.
  - (b) Participant observation method.
  - (c) Quasi-participant observation method.

### **Non-Participant Observation Method:**

- This type is applied when the observer collects facts in the most formal manner.
- Often the observed persons are aware of the investigations going on.
- It is often used in small group research situation.
- Complete non-participation becomes both difficult and uncomfortable for both the observer and the observed, because the observer is always present but there is no standard set of relationship or role patterns for the non member observer to follow.

### **Participant Observation Method:**

- In this method the observer takes on the role of a member of the group in disguise, participates in different activities or functions of the group, and at the sometime observes the behaviour or activities of other members of the group, who are completely unaware of the procedure.
- For this type of observation it is essential that the investigator introduces himself to the group in such a disguised manner that he is accepted as a member of the group and at the same time able to fulfil his real purpose of observation.
- Understanding of real life cannot always be achieved through questionnaire or other documents. Living with natives, on the other hands, help to master their language and converse with them freely.

- The observer becomes more observed among them and the natives lose their self-consciousness at his presence. This helps to know even the beliefs and superstitions, the un-written laws and thus to get a full picture of their lives.
- The various studies have demonstrated that the participant observation allows observation of the individual's behaviour in the most natural condition as long as the individuals are not aware of being observed.
- Secondly, the extent to which the observer participates most successfully, determines the success of observation.
- Here the researcher has access to a body of information which would not have been easily obtained by observer as an outsider.
- No doubt high degree of participation facilitates the observer, yet it has its disadvantages also.
- With the greater degree of participation, the observer develops close relationship with other members of the group. He may learn to follow and like the behaviour pattern of the group, and thus he is less able to find out what the individuals are doing.
- Such affiliations may make him emotionally attached to the members which may destroy the quality of objectivity, which is an essential requirement for a scientific investigation.
- The greatest difficulty in the participation observation method is in recording the observed facts. If he records at the spot, he kills the naturalness of the fact, may likely lose the confidence of the people.
- If he records later on, he may forget many things.
- It is said that the best thing is to record it in brief at the spot and then write down the details at short interval, secretly away from the spot.
- Another difficulty with the participant observation or any other observation is deciding about the contents of observation which are relevant to his line of investigation from the innumerable activities going on.

### **Quasi- Participant Observation Method:**

- Quasi participant observation method involves the merits of both participant and non participant observation methods.
- This type of observation method involving limited amount of participation in the community activities. It is difficult for the observer and the observed to maintain the quality of complete non- participation.
- In non participation observation method the observer is all the time present as an outsider and as a non- participant in group activities. This makes both the observed and observer uncomfortable.
- Likewise, it is also impossible for the observer to be a genuine and full participant in all the ways. Full participation may become some times essential and even un-avoidable in participation observation method.
- In quasi- participant observation, the investigator can play the roles of both observer and participant in a simple and easy manner.

### **Observation Bias and Source of Bias:**

- In any observation method there are two possible sources of bias:

- (a) Bias due to observer, and
- (b) Bias due to observed

**(a) Bias due to observer:**

- This type of bias occurs when the observer is influenced by his own opinion, attitude and cultural values at the time of observing or recording or making inferences from the observation.
- The observer has to collect and digest the information desired from his observations and then make valid inferences:
- There is also a possibility that the observer making incorrect inferences by over looking certain actions as unimportant by wrongly over-emphasizing certain behaviour. This may happen when the observer is well acquainted with the situation.
- On the other hand, if the observer is not acquainted, there is a chance of inadequate observation.

**(b) Bias due to observed:**

- Bias may take place also when awareness of the observation situation by the observed interferes with the naturalness of the events.
- The observed may not like to be observed or may not behave naturally e.g. the children may stop playing or mothers may stop nursing the child.
- Thus, simple presence of observer interferes with the naturalness of the event.

**Measures to avoid bias and make observation scientific:**

- Whatever the type of observation method, structured or unstructured, controlled or uncontrolled, participant non-participant or quasi participant, the problem of involvement of bias and subjectivity is always there.
- The accuracy of the observation method can be increased in different ways e.g. by using additional aids, by following the check list etc.

**(a) Use of Aids:**

Observation method can be made scientific by the use of additional methods of observing and recording e.g. we can make use of camera, tape-recorder etc.

**(b) Use of Check-Lists:**

Use of check list is also made for observing and recording of the phenomenon. It contains different heads:

**(a) The participants or observed:**

Observation and recording of the phenomena or the events should be made in terms of detailed description of the participants viz. in terms of their age, sex, occupation, group membership etc.

**(b) The Setting:**

- one should also note down about the setting or the place of occurrence of events under observation.
- it should also include the description of the surrounding environment.

**(c) Purpose:**

- purpose here means the objectives, or goals that brought the participants together.

**(d) Types of behaviour:**

- Nature and type of social behaviour going on has also to be recorded.
- This includes the exact nature of social behaviour, the types of action and inter actions from persons to persons.

**(e) Frequency or duration:**

- Frequency or duration of the event has to be noted in terms of total period and duration of event.
- one has also to check how frequently the events occurs and record them under different categories like rarely, once, frequently, etc.
- the use of check list helps to avoid bias to a great extent. However, it may not be possible to use check list all the time.
- it may not also be possible to get much detailed information as per the check list. Events may occur too rapidly and the investigator might not be able to observe and record simultaneously and systematically all the time.

**Selection and Appointment of Experience Observers:**

- selection and appointment of experienced observers increases the possibility of more accurate observation.
- in participant observation method, the experiences of observer is most helpful.
- with experience, however, the ability to remember increases, and the observer comes to feel that he is able to record significant part of observation more accurately.

**Appointment of Several Observers:**

- the next best situation is the have two or more people observe the same event.
- it provides opportunity to compare their findings and check the bias involved.
- on some occasions, when it is not possible to use more than one observer, through out the course of a study, it may be desirable to do so in the early stages, or at least, during a pilot period in a similar setting.