

Qualitative Field Research – Observational Data Collection:

YU HUMAN PARTICIPANTS REVIEW COMMITTEE (HPRC) GUIDELINES

Preamble:

This guideline is to assist researchers in thinking about some of the ethical issues that might arise while collecting observational data, as well as to prepare their protocols in a way that will provide the HPRC with the sufficient information on the observational component of the research project.

Definition:

Observational studies allow researchers to observe social life in natural environments and recognize nuances of attitude and behavior that might escape researchers using other methods (Babbie, 2020). Observational data collection can encompass a broad spectrum of research strategies. The role of the researcher/observer can change from being a full participant to a complete observer, (no interactions with ‘participants’ – ‘fly on the wall’ approach) while their relation to participants’ culture can vary from being an insider to an outsider. Researchers can conduct multiple observational visits over a short period of time or a longer period of time (months, years) where they embed themselves in a particular group. Below is a table that shows different dynamics in observational data collection and can be useful for researchers to contextualize their positionality while preparing their HPRC applications.

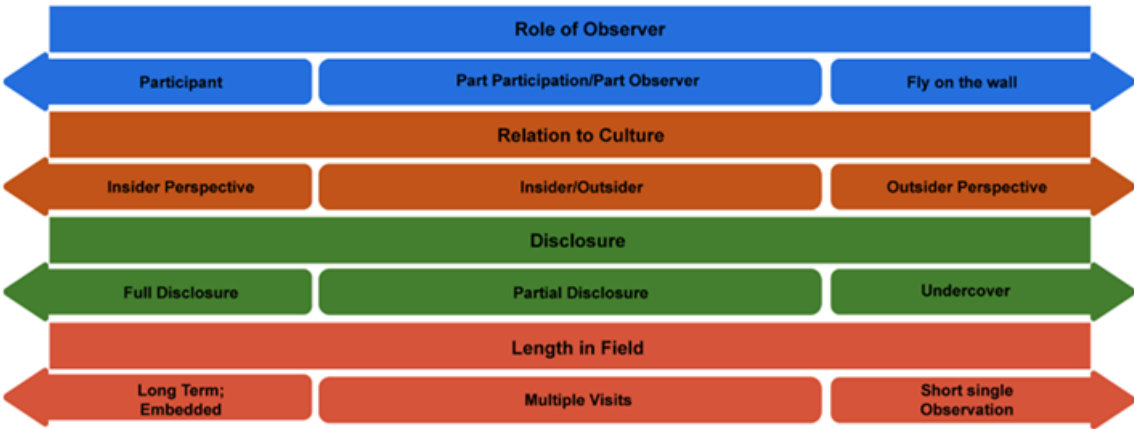


Figure 1. Taken from Hurst, A. 2023: pg. 167

Types of Observational Data Collection:

a. Non-participant (Naturalistic) Observational Research:

Non-participant observational research is “the study of human acts or behaviours in a natural environment in which people involved in their normal activities are observed with or without their knowledge by researchers who do not intervene in any way in the activity (also known as naturalistic observational research)” (TCPS2 2022: pg. 19). Observational studies may be undertaken in publicly accessible spaces (e.g., a stadium, library, museum, planetarium, beach, park), in virtual settings (e.g., online groups)¹, or in private or controlled spaces (e.g., private clubs or organizations). Depending on where the research is conducted, naturalistic observation can be subject to ethics review.

Researchers who plan to conduct non-participant observational research should consider and answer the points below:

- › Who and what activities will be observed?
- › Where will the observations take place? In publicly accessible spaces (e.g., a stadium, library, museum, planetarium, beach, park), in virtual settings (e.g., online groups), or in private or controlled spaces (e.g., workspaces, private clubs or organizations).
- › What are the expectations of privacy that prospective participants might have? Consider if permission/approval may be needed from the organization/institution/event organizer, etc. for the researcher to conduct the observation.
- › What is the length of time needed for observations? Will observations be conducted of a single participant over a period of time or just once?
- › What are the means of recording the observations (field notes etc.)? Will the research records or published reports involve identification of the participants/organizations/events? Researchers should consider whether any identification of the participants will impact risks (such as social risks).
- › Are the observations taking place separately from other research activities? For example, observations will be conducted separately from interviews. If so, a separate consent form may be required for observations.

¹ Please see guidelines for Research Involving Social Media Platforms

Is Non-participant (Naturalistic) Observational Research subject to ethics review?

Non-participant (naturalistic) research involving observation of human acts or behaviours in natural environments or virtual settings **where people have a reasonable or limited expectation of privacy, is subject to ethics review.** Researchers must submit their application forms and any other relevant documents for review by the HPRC.

In cases where the researcher does not plan to seek participants' consent for naturalistic observational research, they shall demonstrate to the HPRC that necessary precautions and measures have been taken to address privacy and confidentiality issues and clearly outline these steps within your application.

Per TCSP2 Article 2.3, for non-participant (naturalistic) observational research of people in public places, ethics review would not be required where:

- a. it does not involve any intervention staged by the researcher, or direct interaction with the individuals or groups;
- b. individuals or groups targeted for observation have no reasonable expectation of privacy; and
- c. any dissemination of research results does not allow identification of specific individuals¹.

Please note that if the individuals are vulnerable (for example children, young people, elderly people) then the ethical and risk issues are more acute, and it is important that the researcher seeks the relevant permissions to undertake the research even if the observations are taking place in a public place.

b. Participant Observational Research:

Participant observational research where the researcher is, to a greater or lesser extent, engaged in the day-to-day activities of the participants while conducting observations is subject to ethics review. Conducting participant observation covers a wide range of ethical issues that are complex and often unpredictable. When planning to conduct participatory observational research, researchers must address the questions below as they are applicable to their research context in their HPRC application:

- › What will be the setting(s) for participatory observation and what potential interactions are involved (for example, close interpersonal interactions, observation of public meetings, actual participation in social events etc.)?
- › How do you plan to enter the field and make people more familiar with your presence?
- › How long will you stay in the field?

- How involved do you plan to be with the research participants? What kinds of relationships will you form? Considering the potentially changing nature of your relationships over time, how will you gracefully “exit” the field with the least amount of pain to those who have come to rely on your presence?
- How might your own social location—identity, position—affect the study? Please consider power differentials rooted in gender, class, health, culture and so on.
- How do you plan to inform the community/group/individuals of your identity, purpose, topic of research and method for the setting/group studied? What formal/informal ways you use to obtain informed consent? Please clearly explain ethical dilemmas that might arise, or limitations to ideal procedures in given contexts.
- What are the means of recording you will use (e.g. field notes, mapping, photography, video- and audio-recording etc.)?

Researchers are encouraged to think about the changing ethical challenges through the various stages of their project. Since it is difficult to anticipate every ethical issue, researchers engaged in long term participant observation need to continuously engage themselves about the ethical issues arising as the research setting undergoes change.

c. Covert Observational Research:

Covert observation refers to an observation method carried out without the explicit awareness and agreement of the observed participants. Generally, covert research is discouraged according to ethical guidelines, although it is recognised that covert designs may be necessary in exceptional cases when it may provide unique forms of evidence that are crucial to the research objectives and methodology, or where overt observation might alter the phenomenon being studied. It should be highlighted that covert research is only justified if important issues are being addressed and if matters of social significance, which cannot be uncovered in other ways, are likely to be discovered. Where covert research is planned, a full review by the HPRC is required.

Obtaining Informed Consent for Observational Studies:

Unless the research project meets the conditions of Article 2.3 (please see above), informed consent of participants should be sought for observational research. In cases involving participant observation where researchers would not find it feasible or desirable to seek written informed consent by all participants, verbal consent will be required.

The researcher should obtain written and/or verbal informed consent from each individual participant with whom the researcher will be interacting. However, this may not be possible for observational research in some settings, for example, when observing crowd behaviour at a football match or in a shopping centre. If consent is not being obtained from the individuals being observed, the HPRC would expect to see justification of this in the ethics application.

In situations where it is not possible to seek informed consent, other methods may be used to provide information to those who might be observed. Strategies include, but are not limited to:

- Disclose and disseminate as broadly as possible, through general announcements or other more informal means, the researcher's purpose, research topic, and data gathering method by displaying posters about the research and/or providing information sheets to individuals entering the observed space so that participants are aware that any of their interactions with the researcher may constitute some form of data gathering.
- Seek permission from group leaders or spokespersons, where appropriate, but especially if they can help to broadcast to a community the researcher's identity, purpose, and method. However, researchers should also be careful to avoid situations where such public endorsements/announcements to the community can create pressure to participate.
- Please note ethical issues may be raised by observations of workplaces because of the power relationship between those being observed and their managers. Careful consideration should be given to whether the individuals being observed should be asked for their informed consent rather than just the managers or authorized representatives/executives/administrators.
- It is especially important to remain aware that some participants might not be fully informed despite general announcements in public. As the researcher gains awareness of the level of information individual participants have about the researcher's identity, purpose, and method, should make every possible effort to disclose such information individually.
- Where practical and feasible, individuals should be given the option of withdrawing from the research, so that they remain free to avoid all interaction with the researcher.

Sources:

Babbie, E. R. (2020). The practice of social research. Cengage AU.

British Sociological Association Statement of Ethical Practice | 2017 from https://www.britsoc.co.uk/media/24310/bsa_statement_of_ethical_practice.pdf

Chapman, S., McNeill, P., & McNeill, P. (2005). Research Methods (3rd ed.). Taylor and Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203463000>

Hurst, A. (2023). Research Design. Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods. Oregon State University <https://open.oregonstate.education/qualresearchmethods/>

TCPS2 2022, “TriCouncil Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans” Retrieved January 3rd 2024 from <https://ethics.gc.ca/eng/documents/tcps2-2022-en.pdf>

University of Basel, “Guide to Participant Observation” https://www.unibas.ch/dam/jcr:4a44ecc6-3dc9-4eb1-a9ea-272f62932583/UEK_Guide%20to%20Participant%20Observation_May_2023.pdf

University of Leeds, “Low Risk Observation Protocol” https://secretariat.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/109/2023/12/Low_Risk_Observation_Protocol.pdf

University of Toronto, Participant Observation from <https://research.utoronto.ca/participant-observation>

University of Toronto, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board (SSH REB) (2005) “Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Participant Observation” <https://www.mcgill.ca/mqhrq/files/mqhrq/participant-observation-guidelines.pdf>