

Observations

Objective: to collect data in a “natural setting”

Observer Roles

- Complete Observer (nonparticipant observer): Not involved in the setting or with the participants. Observer is not seen or noticed.
- Observer as Participant: Observes the setting and individuals for brief periods. The observer is seen, but not involved with those being researched.
- Participant as Observer: Observer takes part in the activity being studied or observed. Seeks to gain insider status without participating in the core activities that would change the outcome.
- Complete participant: Highest level of involvement. Observers study scenes that they are already a part of or they become members of the group being observed during the course of the research. The experience is one of total immersion.

Things To Consider When Designing A Field Observation

- Does the location fit with your assessment purposes? Why?
- What are the parameters surrounding the site? Will you want to observe from multiple locations or stay in one location?
- How do you relate to this site as the observer? What is your positionality in relation to the observation site?
- Will there be access issues? Is it a public location or private?
- Are there risks?
- What are the ethical concerns with observing in this location?
- When, where, and how will you write field notes?

Writing Field Notes

- What to write:
 - Record what people say and do
 - Record what you observe, think, and feel

Reference: Schuh, J.H. and Associates. (2009). Assessment Methods for Student Affairs. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

- Record what the place looks like – in detail
- Record initial impressions
- Note dates, times, locations, and people
- Use quotation marks for direct quotes
- There is no such thing as too much detail

What not to write:

- Try to avoid generalizations (for example, “so and so always...”)
- Try to avoid judgment statements (for example, “so and so eats a lot”)

An observation protocol is provided on the assessment website.

Nine Dimensions of Data Collection When Focusing The Observation

- Space: the physical space
- Actors: the people involved in the situation
- Activities: the various activities the people are doing in the setting
- Objects: the physical elements present in the setting
- Acts: actions of individuals
- Events: related activities that individuals carry out in the setting
- Time: the time sequence in the setting
- Goals: the activities, things people are attempting to accomplish in the setting
- Feelings: emotions expressed in the setting