



Direct Observation Method

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Purpose

This session will

- ❖ Introduce a participatory and field-based method: direct observations
- ❖ It will explain the method
- ❖ It will assess the pros and cons of direct observations

Definition of direct observation

According to US Center for Disease Control direct observation is:

“Observation is way of gathering data by watching behavior, events, or noting physical characteristics in their natural setting. Observations can be overt (everyone knows they are being observed) or covert (no one knows they are being observed and the observer is concealed).

Observations can be either direct or indirect. Direct observation is when you watch interactions, processes, or behaviors as they occur. Indirect observations are when you watch the results of interactions, processes, or behaviors.”

Why is direct observation useful?

Because:

- It allows you to understand an ongoing process or situation which may have been planned in the project/program/policy.
- You can gather data on individual behaviors or interactions between people.
- It helps you better assess a physical setting.
- It can help data collection from individuals when it is not a realistic option.

Steps in implementing direct observation

Step 1: Determine the focus: why do you need direct observation? what information/data do you seek to gather?.

Step 2: Design a system for data collection with:

- Recording sheets and checklists
- Observation guides
- Field notes.

Step 3: Select the sites.

Step 4: Select the observers: gender balance, language concern, etc.

Step 5: Train the observers

Step 6: Plan the observation periods carefully.

The advantages of using direct observation

- Setting is natural, flexible and unstructured
- Observer may make his/her identity known or remain anonymous
- Observer may actively participate or observe passively
- Can be combined with a variety of other data collection methods
- Generates relevant, quantifiable data
- Most useful for studying a “small unit” such as an office, production unit, etc.

The limitations of using direct observation

- Requires skilled observer: importance of solid training.
- The observer has less control over the situation in a natural environment
- Hawthorne effect—if group is aware that they are being observed, resulting behavior may be affected
- Observations cannot be generalized to entire population unless a plan for representativeness is developed
- If observer chooses to be involved in the activity, he/she may lose objectivity
- Not realistic for use with large groups.

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